

SoldierOf An Empire
Unacquainted With Defeat

byGlen Cook

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The empire of the title is Shinsan-The Dread Empire. The soldier is Tain, disillusioned with his past life and seeking peace and a new identity. But the difficulties of leaving one's past behind are insurmountable

and Tain must finally accept what he is—a soldier of an empire unacquainted with defeat. For those of you who have read and enjoyed Cook's wonderful Dread Empire books, and for those of you who haven't yet, here is another piece of that world.

I

His name was Tain and he was a man to beware. The lacquered armor of the Dread Empire rode in the packs on his mule.

The pass was narrow, treacherous, and, therefore, little used. The crumbled slate lay loose and deep, clacking underfoot with the ivory-on-ivory sound of punji counters in the senyo game. More threatened momentary avalanche off the precarious slopes. A cautious man. Tain walked. He led the roan gelding. His mule's tether he had knotted to the roan's saddle.

An end to the shale walk came. Tain breathed deeply, relieved. His muscles ached with the strain of maintaining his footing.

A flint-tipped arrow shaved the gray over his right ear.

The black longsword leapt into his right hand, the equally dark shortsword into his left. He vanished among the rocks before the bowstring's echoes died.

Silence.

Not a bird chirped. Not one chipmunk scurried across the slope, pursuing the arcane business of that gentle breed. High above, one lone eagle floated majestically against an intense blue backdrop of cloudless sky. Its shadow skittered down the ragged mountainside like some frenetic daytime ghost. The only scent on the breeze was that of old and brittle stone.

A man's scream butchered the stillness.

Tain wiped his shortsword on his victim's greasy furs. The dark blade's polish appeared oily. It glistened sullen indigos and purples when the sun hit right.

Similar blades had taught half a world the meaning of fear.

A voice called a name. Another responded with an apparent "Shut up!" Tain couldn't be sure. The languages of the mountain tribes were mysteries to him.

He remained kneeling, allowing trained senses to roam. A fly landed on the dead man's face. It made nervous patrols in ever-smaller circles till it started exploring the corpse's mouth.

Tain moved.

The next one died without a sound. The third celebrated his passing by plunging downhill in a clatter of pebbles.

Tain knelt again, waiting. There were two more. One wore an aura of Power. A shaman. He might prove difficult.

Another shadow fluttered across the mountainside. Tain smiled thinly. Death's daughters were clinging to her skirts today.

The vulture circled warily, not dropping lower till a dozen sisters had joined its grim pavane.

Tain took a jar from his travel pouch, spooned part of its contents with two fingers. A cinnamon-like smell sweetened the air briefly, to be pursued by an odor as foul as death. He rubbed his hands till they were thoroughly greased. Then he exchanged the jar for a small silver box containing what appeared to be dried peas. He rolled one pea round his palm, stared at it intently. Then he boxed his hands, concentrated on the shaman, and sighed.

The vultures dropped lower. A dog crept onto the trail below, slunk to the corpse there. It sniffed, barked tentatively, then whined. It was a mangy auburn bitch with teats stretched by the suckling of pups.

Tain breathed gently between his thumbs. A pale cerulean light leaked between his fingers. Its blue quickly grew as intense as that of the topless sky. The glow penetrated his flesh, limning his finger bones.

Tain gasped, opened his hands. A blinding blue ball drifted away.

He wiped his palms on straggles of mountain grass, followed up with a dirt wash. He would need firm grips on his swords.

His gaze never left the bobbing blue ball, nor did his thoughts abandon the shaman.

The ball drifted into a stand of odd, conical rocks. They had a crude, monumental look.

A man started screaming. Tain took up his blades.

The screams were those of a beast in torment. They went on and on and on.

Tain stepped up onto a boulder, looked down. The shaman writhed below him. The blue ball finished consuming his right forearm. It started on the flesh above his elbow. A scabby, wild-haired youth beat the flame with a tattered blanket.

Tain's shadow fell across the shaman. The boy looked up into brown eyes that had never learned pity. Terror drained his face.

A black viper's tongue flicked once, surely.

Tain hesitated before he finished the shaman. The wild wizard wouldn't have shown him the same mercy.

He broke each of the shaman's fetishes. A skull on a lance he saved and planted like a grave marker. The witch-doctor's people couldn't misapprehend that message.

Time had silvered Tain's temples, but he remained a man to beware.

Once he had been an Aspirant. For a decade he had been dedicated to the study of the Power. The Tervola, the sorcerer-lords of his homeland, to whose peerage he had aspired, had proclaimed him a

Candidate at three. But he had never shown the cold will necessary, nor had he developed the inalterable discipline needed, to attain Select status. He had recognized, faced, and accepted his shortcomings. Unlike so many others, he had learned to live with the knowledge that he couldn't become one of his motherland's masters.

He had become one of her soldiers instead, and his Aspirant training had served him well.

Thirty years with the legions. And all he had brought away was a superbly trained gelding, a cranky mule, knowledge, and his arms and armor. And his memories. The golden markings on the breastplate in his mule packs declared him a leading centurion of the Demon Guard, and proclaimed the many honors he had won.

But a wild western sorcerer had murdered the Demon Prince. The Guard had no body to protect. Tain had no one to command.... And now the Tervola warred among themselves, with the throne of the Dread Empire as prize.

Never before had legion fought legion.

Tain had departed. He was weary of the soldier's life. He had seen too many wars, too many battles, too many pairs of lifeless eyes staring up with "Why?" reflected in their dead pupils. He had done too many evils without questioning, without receiving justification. His limit had come when Shinsan had turned upon herself like a rabid bitch able to find no other victim.

He couldn't be party to the motherland's self-immolation. He couldn't bear consecrated blades against men with whom he had shared honorable fields.

He had deserted rather than do so.

There were many honors upon his breastplate. In thirty years he had done many dread and dire deeds.

The soldiers of Shinsan were unacquainted with defeat. They were the world's best, invincible, pitiless, and continuously employed. They were feared far beyond the lands where their boots had trod and their drums had beaten their battle signals.

Tain hoped to begin his new life in a land unfamiliar with that fear.

He continued into the mountains.

One by one. Death's daughters descended to the feast.

II

One ivory candle illuminated a featureless cell. A man in black faced it. He sat in the lotus position on a barren granite floor. Behind a panther mask of hammered gold his eyes remained closed.

He wasn't sleeping. He was listening with a hearing familiar only to masters of the Power.

He had been doing this for months, alternating with a fellow Aspirant. He had begun to grow bored.

He was Tervola Candidate Kai Ling. He was pursuing an assignment which could hasten his elevation to Select. He had been fighting for the promotion for decades, never swerving in his determination to seize what seemed forever beyond his grasp.

His body jerked, then settled into a tense lean. Little tremors stirred his extremities.

"West," he murmured. "Far, far to the west." The part of him that listened extended itself, analyzed, fixed a location.

An hour passed.

Finally, Kai Ling rose. He donned a black cape which hung beside the nearly invisible door. He smiled thinly behind his mask. Poor Chong. Chong wouldn't know which of them had won till he arrived for his turn on watch.

III

Tain rested, observing.

It seemed a calm and peaceful hamlet in a calm and peaceful land. A dozen rude houses crowded an earthen track which meandered on across green swales toward a distant watchtower. The squat stronghold could be discerned only from the highest hilltops. Solitary shepherds' steads lay sprinkled across the countryside, their numbers proclaiming the base for the regional economy.

The mountains Tain had crossed sheltered the land from the east. The ivory teeth of another range glimmered above the haze to the north. Tain grazed his animals and wondered if this might be the land he sought.

He sat on a hillside studying it. He was in no hurry to penetrate it. Masterless now, with no fixed destination, he felt no need to rush. Too, he was reluctant. Human contact meant finalization of the decision he had reached months ago, in Shinsan.

Intellectually he knew that it was too late, but his heart kept saying that he could still change his mind. It would take the imminent encounter to sever his heartlines home.

It was ...scary... this being on his own.

As a soldier he had often operated alone. But then he had been ordered to go, to do, and always he had had his legion or the Guard waiting. His legion had been home and family. Though the centurion was the keystone of the army, his father-Tervola chose his companions, and made most of his decisions and did most of his thinking for him.

Tain had wrestled with himself for a year before abandoning the Demon Guard.

A tiny smile tugged his lips. All those thousands who wept on hearing the distant mutter of drums-what

would they think, learning that soldiers of the Dread Empire suffered fears and uncertainties too?

"You may as well come out." he called gently. A boy was watching him from the brushy brookside down to his right. "I'm not going anywhere for hours."

Tain hoped he had chosen the right language. He wasn't sure where he had exited the Dragon's Teeth. The peaks to the north, he reasoned, should be the Kratchnodians. That meant he should be in the part of Shara butting against East Heatherland. The nomadic Sharans didn't build homes and herd sheep, so these people should be immigrants from the west. They should speak Iwa Skolovdan.

It was one of four western tongues he had mastered when the Demon Prince had looked westward, anticipating Shinsan's expansion thither.

"I haven't eaten a shepherd in years." An unattended flock had betrayed the boy.

The lad left cover fearfully, warily, but with a show of bravado. He carried a ready sling in his right hand. He had well-kempt blond hair, pageboy trimmed, and huge blue eyes. He looked about eight.

Tain cautioned himself: the child was no legion entry embarking upon the years of education, training, and discipline which gradually molded a soldier of Shinsan. He was a westerner, a genuine child, as free as a wild dog and probably as unpredictable.

"Hello, shepherd. My name is Tain. What town would that be?"

"Hello." The boy moved several steps closer. He eyed the gelding uncertainly.

"Watch the mule. She's the mean one."

"You talk funny. Where did you come from? Your skin is funny, too."

Tain grinned. He saw things in reverse. But this was a land of round-eyes. He would be the stranger, the guest. He would have to remember, or suffer a cruel passage.

Arrogant basic assumptions were drilled into the soldiers of Shinsan. Remaining humble under stress might be difficult.

"I came from the east."

"Over the mountains?" Disbelief flavored the boy's tone.

"Yes."

"But the hill people.... They rob and kill everybody. Papa said." He edged closer, fascinated by Tain's swords.

"Sometimes their luck isn't good. Don't you have a name?"

"Steban." The boy relented reluctantly. "Steban Kleckla. Are those swords? Real swords?"

"Longsword and shortsword. I used to be a soldier." He winced. It hurt to let go of his past.

"My Uncle Mikla has a sword. He was a soldier. He went all the way to Hellin Daimiel. That was in the El Murid Wars. He was a hero."

"Really? I'll have to meet your uncle." "Were you a hero when you were a soldier? Did you see any wars?"

"A few. They weren't much fun, Steban." How could he explain to a boy from this remote land, when all his knowledge was second-hand, through an uncle whose tales had grown with the years?

"But you get to go places and see things." "Places you don't want to go, to see things you don't want to see."

The boy backed a step away. "I'm going to be a soldier," he declared. His lower lip protruded in a stubborn pout.

Wrong tack. Tain thought. Too intense. Too bitter.. "Where's your dog? I thought shepherds always had dogs." "She died."

"I see. I'm sorry. Can you tell me the name of the village? I don't know where I am." "Wtoctalisz."

"Wtoctalisz." Tain's tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar syllables. He grinned. Steban grinned back. He edged closer, eyeing Tain's swords. "Can I see?"

"I'm sorry. No. It's an oath. I can't draw them unless I mean to kill." Would the boy understand if he tried to explain consecrated blades? "Oh."

"Are there fish in the creek?" "What? Sure. Trout."

Tain rose. "Let's see if we can catch lunch." Steban's eyes grew larger. "Gosh! You're as big as Grimmir." Tain chuckled. He had been the runt of the Demon Guard. "Who's Grimmir?"

The boy's face darkened. "A man. From the Tower. What about your horse?" "He'll stay."

The roan would do what was expected of him amidst sorcerer's conflicts that made spring storms seem as inconsequential as a child's temper tantrum. And the mule wouldn't stray from the gelding.

Steban was speechless after Tain took the three-pounder with a casual hand-flick, bear fashion. The old soldier was fast.

"You make a fire. I'll clean him." Tain glowed at Steban's response. It took mighty deeds to win notice in the Dread Empire. He fought a temptation to show off.

In that there were perils. He might build a falsely founded, over-optimistic self-appraisal. And a potential enemy might get the measure of his abilities.

So he cooked trout, seasoning it with a pinch of spice from the trade goods in his mule packs.

"Gosh, this's good." As Steban relaxed he became ever more the chatterbox. He had asked a hundred questions already and seldom had he given Tain a chance to answer. "Better than Ma or Shirl ever made."

Tain glowed again. His field cooking was a point of pride. "Who's Shirl?"

"She was my sister." "Was?"

"She's gone now." There was a hard finality to Steban's response. It implied death, not absence.

IV

Steban herded the sheep homeward. Tain followed, stepping carefully. The roan paced him, occasionally cropping grass, keeping an eye on the mule. For the first time Tain felt at ease with his decision to leave home.

It was unlikely that this country would become his new home, but he liked its people already, as he saw them reflected in Steban Kleckla. He and the boy were friends already.

Steban jerked to a stop. His staff fell as he flung a hand to his mouth. The color drained from his face.

That Aspirant's sense-feel for danger tingled Tain's scalp. In thirty years it had never been wrong. With the care of a man avoiding a cobra, he turned to follow Steban's gaze.

A horse and rider stood silhouetted atop a nearby hill, looking like a black paper cutout. Tain could discern little in the dying light. The rider seemed to have horns.

Tain hissed. The roan trotted to his side. He leaned against his saddle, where his weapons hung.

The rider moved out, descending the hill's far side. Steban started the sheep moving at a faster pace. He remained silent till the Kleckla stead came into view.

"Who was that?" Tain hazarded a second time, when he reckoned the proximity of lights and parents would rejuvenate the boy's nerve. "Who?"

"That rider. On the hill. You seemed frightened." "Ain't scared of nothing. I killed a wolf last week." He was evading. This was a tale twice told already, and growing fast. First time Steban had bragged about having driven the predator away. Then he had claimed to have broken the beast's shoulder with a stone from his sling.

"I misunderstood. I'm sorry. Still, there was a rider. And you seemed to know him."

The lights of Steban's home drew nearer. Boy and sheep increased their pace again. They were late. Steban had been too busy wheedling stories from his new friend to watch the time closely.

"Steban? That you, boy?" A lantern bobbed toward them. The man carrying it obviously was Steban's father. Same eyes. Same hair. But worry had etched his forehead with deep lines. In his left hand he bore a wicked oaken quarterstaff.

An equally concerned woman walked beside him. Once Tain suspected, she had been beautiful. In a round-eye sort of way. Doubtlessly, life here quickly made crones of girls. "Ma. Papa. This's my new friend. His name is Tain. He used to be a soldier. Like Uncle Mikla. He came across the mountains. He

caught a fish with his hands and his horse can do tricks, but his mule will bite you if you get too close to her. I told him he should come for supper."

Tain inclined his head. "Freeman Kleckla. Freelady. The grace of heaven descend ." He didn't know an appropriately formal Iwa Skolovdan greeting. His effort sounded decidedly odd in translation.

Man and wife considered him without warmth.

"A Caydarman watched us," Steban added. He started coaxing the sheep into pens.

The elder Kleckla scanned the surrounding darkness. "An evil day when we catch their eye. Welcome, then. Stranger. We can't offer much but refuge from the night."

"Thank you. Freeman. I'll pay, that your resources be not depleted without chance of replacement." There was a stiffness about Kleckla which made Tain feel the need to distance with formality.

"This is the Zemstvi, Stranger. Titles, even Freeman and Free-lady, are meaningless here. They belong to tamed and ordered lands, to Iwa Skolovda and the Home Counties. Call me Toma. My wife is Rula. Come. I'll show you where to bed your animals."

"As you will.. .Toma." He bowed slightly to the woman. "Rula." She frowned slightly, as if unsure how to respond.

This would be harder than he had anticipated. At home everyone had positions and titles and there were complicated, almost ritualized protocols and honorifics to be exchanged on every occasion of personal contact. "They'll need no fodder. They grazed all afternoon."

One bony milk cow occupied Kleckla's rude barn. She wasn't pleased by Tain's mule. The mule didn't deign to acknowledge her existence.

Toma had no other stock, save his sheep. But he wasn't poor. Possessing cow and flock, he was richer than most men. Richer, in some ways, than Tain, whose fortune was in metal of changeable value and a few pounds of rare spice. Which would bring more in the marketplace of the heart?

"You'll have to sleep out here," Toma informed him. "There's no room. . . ."

Tain recognized the fear-lie. "I understand." He had been puzzling the word zemstvi, which seemed to share roots with frontier and wilderness. Now he thought he understood.

"Are you a new Caydarman?" Toma blurted. He became contrite immediately. "Forget that. Tell me about the man you saw."

Because Toma was so intent, Tain cut off all exterior distractions and carefully reconstructed the moment in the manner he had been taught. A good scout remembered every detail. "Big man. On a big horse, painted, shaggy. Man bearded. With horns."

"Damned Torfin." Toma sublimated anger by scattering hay.

"He didn't have horns. That was his helmet." There was a lot to learn. Tain thought. This was an odd land not like the quiet, mercantile Iwa Skolovda he had studied at home.

He considered the little barn. Its builders had possessed no great skill. He doubted that it was two years old, yet it was coming apart.

"Might as well go eat. Isn't much. Boiled mutton with cabbage and leeks."

"Ah. Mutton. I was hoping." Responding to Toma's surprise. "Mutton is rare at home. Only the rich eat it. We common soldiers made do with grain and pork. Mostly with grain."

"Home? Where would that be?"

"East. Beyond the Dragon's Teeth."

Toma considered the evasion. "We'd better get inside. Rula gets impatient."

"Go ahead. I have a couple of things to do. Don't wait on me. I'll make do with scraps or leftovers."

Toma eyed him, started to speak, changed his mind. "As you will."

Once Toma departed, Tain pursued the Soldier's Evening Ritual, clearing his heart of the day's burdens. He observed the abbreviated Battlefield Ritual rather than the hour of meditation and exercise he pursued under peaceful circumstances. Later he would do it right.

He started for the house.

His neck prickled. He stopped, turned slowly, reached out with an Aspirant's senses.

A man wearing a horned helmet was watching the stead from the grove surrounding the Kleckla's spring. He didn't see Tain.

Tain considered, shrugged. It wasn't his problem. He would tell Toma when they were alone. Let the Freeman decide what ought to be done.

V

The sun was a diameter above the horizon.

Tain released the mule and roan to pasture. He glanced round at the verdant hills. "Beautiful country," he murmured, and wondered what the rest of his journey would bring. He ambled a ways toward the house. Rula was starting breakfast.

These people rose late and started slowly. Already he had performed his Morning Ritual, seen to his travel gear and personal ablutions, and had examined the tracks round the spring. Then he had joined Toma when his host had come to check the sheep.

Toma had first shown relief, then increased concern. He remained steadfastly close-mouthed.

Tain restrained his curiosity. Soldiers learned not to ask questions. "Good morning, Steban."

The boy stood in the door of the sod house, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Morning, Tain. Ma's cooking oats."

"Oh?"

"A treat," Toma explained. "We get a little honeycomb with it."

"Ah. You keep bees?" He hadn't seen any hives. "I had a friend who kept bees. ..." He dropped it, preferring not to remember. Kai Ling had been like a brother. They had been Aspirants together. But Ling hadn't been able to believe he hadn't the talent to become Tervola. He was still trying to climb an unscalable height.

"Wild honey," Toma said. "The hill people gather it and trade it to us for workable iron."

"I see." Tain regarded the Kleckla home for the second time that morning. He wasn't impressed. It was a sod structure with an interior just four paces by six. Its construction matched the barn's. Tain had gotten better workmanship out of legion probationaries during their first field exercises.

A second, permanent home was under construction nearby. A more ambitious project, every timber proclaimed it a dream house. Last night, after supper, Toma had grown starry-eyed and loquacious while discussing it. It was symbolic of the Grail he had pursued into the Zemstvi.

Its construction was as unskilled as that of the barn.

Rula's eyes had tightened with silent pain while her husband penetrated ever more deeply the shifting paths of his dreams.

Toma had been an accountant for the Perchev syndicate in Iwa Skolovda, a tormented, dreamless man using numbers to describe the movements of furs, wool, wheat, and metal billets. His days had been long and tedious. During summer, when the barges and caravans moved, he had been permitted no holidays.

That had been before he had been stricken by the cunning infection, the wild hope, the pale dream of the Zemstvi, here expressed rudely, yet in a way that said that a man had tried.

Rula's face said the old life had been emotional hell, but their apartment had remained warm and the roof hadn't leaked. Life had been predictable and secure.

There were philosophies at war in the Kleckla home, though hers lay mute before the other's traditional right. Accusing in silence.

Toma was Rula's husband. She had had to come to the Zemstvi as the bondservant of his dreams. Or nightmares.

The magic of numbers had shattered the locks on the doors of Toma's soul. It had let the dream light come creeping in. Freedom, the intellectual chimera pursued by most of his neighbors, meant nothing to Kleckla. His neighbors had chosen the hazards of colonizing Shara because of the certainties of Crown protection.

Toma, though, burned with the absolute conviction of a balanced equation. Numbers proved it impossible for a sheep-herding, wool-producing community not to prosper in these benign rolling hills.

What Tain saw, and what Toma couldn't recognize, was that numbers wore no faces. Or were too simplistic. They couldn't account the human factors.

The failure had begun with Toma. He had ignored his own ignorance of the skills needed to survive on a frontier. Shara was no-man's-land. Iwa Skolovda had claimed it for centuries, but never had imposed its suzerainty.

Shara abounded with perils unknown to a city-born clerk.

The Tomas, sadly, often ended up as sacrifices to the Zemstvi.

The egg of disaster shared the nest of his dream, and who could say which had been insinuated by the cowbird of Fate?

There were no numbers by which to calculate ignorance, raiders, wolves, or heart-changes aborting vows politicians had sworn in perpetuity. The ciphers for disease and foul weather hadn't yet been enumerated.

Toma's ignorance of essential craft blazed out all over his homestead. And the handful of immigrants who had teamed their dreams with his and had helped, had had no more knowledge or skill. They, too, had been hungry scribes and number-mongers, swayed by a wild-eyed false prophet innocent of the realities of opening a new land. All but black sheep Mikla, who had come east to keep Toma from being devoured by his own fuzzy-headedness.

Rula-thinking had prevailed amongst most of Toma's disciples. They had admitted defeat and ventured west again, along paths littered with the parched bones of fleeting hope. Toma was stubborn. Toma persisted. Toma's bones would lie beside those of his dreams.

All this Tain knew when he said, "If you won't let me pay, then at least let me help with the new house." Toma regarded him with eyes of iron. "I learned construction in the army." Toma's eyes tightened. He was a proud man. Tain had dealt with stiff-necked superiors for ages. He pursued his offer without showing a hint of criticism. And soon Toma relaxed, responded. "Take a look after breakfast," he suggested. "See what you think. I've been having trouble since Mikla left." "I'd wondered about that," Tain admitted. "Steban gave the impression your brother was living here. I didn't want to pry."

"He walked out." Toma stamped toward the house angrily. He calmed himself before they entered. "My fault. I guess. It was a petty argument. The sheep business hasn't been as good as we expected. He wanted to pick up a little extra trading knives and arrowheads to the tribes. They pay in furs. But the Baron banned that when he came here."

Tain didn't respond. Toma shrugged irritably, started back outside. He stopped suddenly, turned. "He's Rula's brother." Softly, "And that wasn't true. I made him leave. Because I caught him with some arrowheads. I was afraid." He turned again. "Toma. Wait." Tain spoke softly. "I won't mention it." Relief flashed across Kleckla's face.

"And you should know. The man with the horns. The ... Caydarman? He spent part of the night watching the house from the grove."

Toma didn't respond. He seemed distraught. He remained silent throughout breakfast. The visual cues indicated a state of extreme anxiety. He regained his good humor only after he and Tain had worked on

the new house for hours, and then his chatte was inconsequential. He wouldn't open up.

Tain asked no questions.

Neither Toma nor Rula mentioned his departure. Toma soured with each building suggestion, then brightened once it had been implemented. Day's end found less of the structure standing, yet the improvement in what remained had Toma bubbling.

VI

Tain accidentally jostled Rula at the hearth. "Excuse me." Then. "Can I help? Cooking is my hobby."

The woman regarded him oddly. She saw a big man, muscled and corded, who moved like a tiger, who gave an impression of massive strength kept under constant constraint. His skin was tracked by a hundred scars. There wasn't an ounce of softness in or on him. Yet his fingers were deft, his touch delicate as he took her knife and pan. "You don't mind?"

"Mind? You're joking. Two years I haven't had a minute's rest, and you want to know if I mind?"

"Ah. There's a secret to that, having too much work and not enough time. It's in the organization, and in putting yourself into the right state of mind before you start. Most people scatter themselves. They try everything at once."

"I'll be damned." Toma, who had been carrying water to the sheep pens, paused to watch over Tain's shoulder.

Turning the browning mutton. Tain said. "I love to cook. This is a chance for me to show off." He tapped a ghost of spice from an envelope. "Rula, if we brown the vegetables instead of stewing them...."

"I'll be damned." Toma said again. He settled to the floor to watch. He pulled a jar of beer to his side.

"One should strive to achieve the widest possible competence," Tain remarked. "One may never need a skill, but, again, one can't know the future. Tomorrow holds ambushes for the mightiest necromancers. A new skill is another hedge against Fate's whimsey. What happens when a soldier loses a limb here?"

"They become beggars," Rula replied. "Toma, remember how it was right after the war? You couldn't walk a block...."

"My point made for me. I could become a cook. Or an interpreter. Or a smith, or an armorer, according to my handicap. In that way I was well-served. Where's Steban? I asked him to pick some mushrooms. They'll add the final touch. But don't expect miracles. I've never tried this with mutton.... Rula? What is it?"

Toma had bounced up and run outside. She was following him.

"It's Steban. He's worried about Steban."

"Can you tell me?"

"The Caydarmen...." She went blank, losing the animation she had begun showing.

"Who are they?"

"Baron Caydar's men." She would say no more. She just leaned against the door frame and stared into the dusk.

Toma returned a moment later. "It's all right. He's coming. Must have spent the day with the Kosku boy. I see his flock, too."

"Toma. . ." Fear tinged Rula's voice.

"The boy can choose his friends, woman. I'm not so weak that I'll make my children avoid their friends because of my fears."

Tain stirred vegetables and listened, trying to fathom the situation. Toma was scared. The timbre of fear inundated his voice.

He and Rula dropped the subject as if pursuing it might bring some dread upon them.

Steban had collected the right mushrooms. That had worried Tain. He never quite trusted anyone who wasn't legion-trained. "Good, Steban. I think we'll all like this."

"You're cooking?"

"I won't poison you. The fish was good, wasn't it?"

Steban seemed unsure. He turned to his father. "Wes said they were fined five sheep, five goats, and ten geese. He said his Dad said he's not going to pay."

Dread and worry overcame his parents' faces.

"Toma, there'll be trouble." Rula's hands fluttered like nervous doves.

"They can't afford that," Toma replied. "They wouldn't make it through winter."

"Go talk to him. Ask the neighbors to chip in."

"It's got to end. Rula." He turned to Tain. "The Crown sent Baron Caydar to protect us from the tribes. We had less trouble when we weren't protected."

"Toma!"

"The tribes don't bother anyone, Rula. They never did. Hywel goes out of his way to avoid trouble. Just because those royal busybodies got themselves massacred.... They asked for it, trying to make Hywel and Stojan bend the knee."

"Toma, they'll fine us too."

"They have to hear me first."

"They know everything. People tell on each other. You know...."

"Because they're scared. Rula, if the bandits keep pushing, we won't care if we're afraid."

Tain delivered the meal to table. He asked, "Who are the Caydarmen? The one I saw was no Iwa Skolovdan."

"Mercenaries." Toma spat. "Crown wouldn't let Caydar bring regulars. He recruited Trolledyngjans who escaped when the Pretender overthrew the Old House up there. They're a gang of bandits."

"I see." The problem was taking shape. Baron Caydar would be, no doubt, a political exile thrust into an impossible position by his enemies. His assignment here would be calculated to destroy him. And what matter that a few inconsequential colonists suffered?

Tain's motherland was called Dread Empire by its foes. With cause. The Tervola did as they pleased, where and when they pleased, by virtue of sorcery and legions unacquainted with defeat. Shinsan did have its politics and politicians. But never did they treat citizens with contempt.

Tain had studied the strange ways of the west, but he would need time to really grasp their actuality.

After supper he helped Toma haul more water. Toma remarked, "That's the finest eating I've had in years."

"Thank you. I enjoyed preparing it."

"What I wanted to say. I'd appreciate it if you didn't anymore." Tain considered. Toma sounded as though he expected to share his company for a while.

"Rula. She shouldn't have too much time to worry."

"I see."

"I appreciate the help you're giving me...." "You could save a lot of water-hauling with a windmill." "I know. But nobody around here can build one. Anyway. I couldn't pay much. Maybe a share on the sheep. If you'd stay...." Tain faced the east. The sunset had painted the mountains the color of blood. He hoped that was no omen. But he feared that legionnaires were dying at the hands of legionnaires even now. "All right. For a while. But I'll have to move on soon."

He wondered if he could outrun his past. A friend had told him that a man carried his pain like a tortoise carried his shell. Tain suspected the analogy might be more apt than intended. Men not only carried their painshells, they retreated into them if emotionally threatened.

"We need you. You can see that. I've been too stubborn to admit it till now...."

"Stubbornness is a virtue, properly harnessed. Just don't be stubborn against learning."

Steban carried water with them, and seemed impressed. Later, he said, "Tell us about the wars you were in, Tain."

Rula scowled.

"They weren't much. Bloody, sordid little things, Steban. Less fun than sheep-shearing time."

"Oh, come on. Tain. You're always saying things like that." "Mikla made a glory tale of it," Rula said. "You'd think... Well.... That there wasn't any better life."

"Maybe that was true for Mikla. But the El Murid Wars were long ago and far away, and, I expect, he was very young. He remembers the good times, and sees only the dullness in today." "Maybe. He shouldn't fill Steban's head with his nonsense." So Tain merely wove a tale of cities he had seen, describing strange dress and customs. Rula, he noted, enjoyed it as much as her son.

Later still, after his evening ritual, he spent several hours familiarizing himself with the countryside. A soldier's habits died hard.

Twice he spied roving Caydarmen. Neither noticed him. Next morning he rose early and took the gelding for a run over the same ground.

VII

Rula visited Tain's makeshift forge the third afternoon. Bringing a jar of chill spring water was her excuse. "You've been hammering for hours, Tain. You'd better drink something."

He smiled as he laid his hammer aside. "Thank you." He accepted the jar, though he wasn't yet thirsty. He was accustomed to enduring long, baking hours in his armor. He sipped while he waited. She had something on her mind.

"I want to thank you."

"Oh?"

"For what you're doing. For what you've done for Toma. And me."

"I haven't done much."

"You've shown Toma that a man can be proud without being pig-headed. When he's wrong. But maybe you don't see it. Tain. I've lived with that man for eighteen years. I know him too well."

"I see." He touched her hand lightly, recognizing a long and emotionally difficult speech from a woman accustomed to keeping her own counsel.

He didn't know how to help her, though. An unmarried soldier's life hadn't prepared him. Not for a woman who moved him more than should be, for reasons he couldn't comprehend. A part of him said that women were people too, and should respond the same as men, but another part saw them as aliens, mysterious, perhaps even creatures of dread. "If I have done good, I have brought honor to the house."

He chuckled at his own ineptitude. Iwa Skolovdan just didn't have the necessary range of tonal nuance.

"You've given me hope for the first time since Shirl...." she blurted. "I mean, I can see where we're getting somewhere now. I can see Toma seeing it.

"Tain, I never wanted to come to the Zemstvi. I hate it. I hated it before we left home. Maybe I hated it so much that I made it impossible for Toma to succeed. I drove Shirl away...."

"Yes. I could see it. But don't hate yourself for being what you are."

"His dreams were dying, Tain. And I wouldn't give him anything to replace them. And I have to hate myself for that. But now he's coming alive again. He doesn't have to go on being stubborn, just to show me."

"Don't hate anybody, Rula. It's contagious. You end up hating everything, and everybody hates you."

"I can't ever like the Zemstvi. But I love Toma. And with you here, like a rock, he's becoming more like the boy I married. He's started to find his courage again. And his hope. That gives me hope. And that's why I wanted to thank you."

"A rock?"

"Yes. You're there. You don't criticize, you don't argue, you don't judge, you don't fear. You know. You make things possible.... Oh, I don't know how to say what I want. I think the fear is the biggest thing. It doesn't control us anymore."

"I don't think it's all my fault. Rula. You've done your part." He was growing unsettled. Even embarrassed.

She touched his arm. "You're strong, Tain. So strong and sure. My brother Mikla.... He was sure, but not always strong. He fought with Toma all the time."

Tain glanced south across the green hills. Toma had gone to the village in hopes of obtaining metal that could be used in the windmill Tain was going to build. He had been gone for hours.

A tiny silhouette topped a distant rise. Tain sighed in a mixture of disappointment and relief. He was saved having to face the feelings Rula was stirring.

Toma loved the windmill. He wanted to let the house ride till it was finished. Tain had suggested that they might, with a little ingenuity, provide running water. Rula would like that. It was a luxury only lords and merchant princes enjoyed.

Rula followed his gaze. Embarrassment overtook her. Tain yielded the jar and watched her flee.

Soon Toma called, "I got it, Tain! Bryon had an old wagon. He sold me enough to do the whole thing." He rushed to the forge, unburdened himself of a pack filled with rusty iron.

Tain examined the haul. "Good. More than enough for the bushings. You keep them greased, the windmill will last a lifetime."

Toma's boyish grin faded.

"What happened? You were gone a long time."

"Come on in the house. Share a jar of beer with me."

Tain put his tools away and followed Toma. Glancing eastward, he saw the white stain of Steban's flock dribbling down a distant slope, heading home. Beyond Steban, a litle south, stood the grotesque rock formation locals called the Toad. The Sharans believed it the home of a malignant god.

Toma passed the beer. "The Caydarmen visited Kosku again. He wouldn't give them the animals."

Tain still didn't understand. He said nothing.

"They won't stand for it," Rula said. "There'll be trouble."

Toma shrugged. "There'll always be trouble. Comes of being alive." He pretended a philosophical nonchalance. Tain read the fear he was hiding. "They'll probably come tonight...."

"You've been drinking," Rula snapped. "You're not going to...."

"Rula, it's got to stop. Somebody has to show them the limits. We've reached ours. Kosku has taken up the mantle. The rest of us can't...."

"Tain, talk to him."

Tain studied them, sensed them. Their fear made the house stink. He said nothing. After meeting her eyes briefly, he handed Toma the beer and ignored her appeal. He returned to his forge, dissipated his energies pumping the bellows and hammering cherry iron. He didn't dare insinuate himself into their argument. It had to remain theirs alone.

Yet he couldn't stop thinking, couldn't stop feeling. He hammered harder, driven by a taint of anger.

His very presence had altered Toma. Rula had said as much. The man wouldn't have considered supporting this Kosku otherwise. Simply by having entered the man's life he was forcing Toma to prove something. To himself? Or to Rula?

Tain hammered till the hills rang. Neutral as he had tried to remain, he had become heir to a responsibility. Toma had to be shielded from the consequences of artificial bravado.

"Tain?"

The hammer's thunder stammered. "Steban? Home so early?"

"It's almost dark."

"Oh. I lost track of time." He glanced at his handiwork. He had come near finishing while roaming his own mind. "What is it?"

"Will you teach me to be a soldier?"

Tain drove the tongs into the coals as if their mound contained the heart of an enemy. "I don't think so. Your mother...."

"She won't care. She's always telling me to learn something."

"Soldiering isn't what she has in mind. She means your father's lessons."

"Tain, writing and ciphers are boring. And what good did they do my Dad? Anyway, he's only teaching me because Mother makes him."

What kind of world did Rula live in, there behind the mask of her face? Tain wondered.

It couldn't be a happy world. It had suffered the deaths of too many hopes. Time had beaten her down. She had become an automaton getting through each day with the least fuss possible.

"Boring, but important. What good a soldier who can't read or write? All he can do is carry a spear."

"Can you read?"

"Six languages. Every soldier in my army learns at least two. To become a soldier in my country is like becoming a priest in yours, Steban."

Rula, he thought. Why do I find you unique when you're just one of a million identical sisters scattered through the feudal west? The entire sub-continent lay prostrate beneath the heel of a grinding despair, a ponderous changelessness. It was a tinder-dry philosophical forest. The weakest spark flung off by a hope-bearing messiah would send it up.

"A soldier's training isn't just learning to use a sword, Steban. It's learning a way of life. I could teach you to fence, but you'd never become a master. Not till you learned the discipline, the way of thinking and living you need to...."

"Boy, you going to jabber all night? Get those sheep in the pens."

Toma leaned against the doorframe of the house. A jar of beer hung from his hand. Tain sensed the random anger rushing around inside him. It would be as unpredictable as summer lightning.

"Take care of the sheep, Steban. I'll help water them later."

He cleaned up his forge, then himself, then carried water till Rula called them to supper.

Anger hung over the meal like a cloying fog rolling in off a noisome marsh. Tain was its focus. Rula wanted him to control Toma. Toma wanted his support. And Steban wanted a magical access to the heroic world his uncle had created from the bloodies most ineptly fought, and most pointless war of recent memory Tain ate in silence.

Afterward, he said, "I've nearly finished the bushings and shaft bearings. We can start the tower tomorrow."

Toma grunted.

Tain shrugged. The man's mood would have to take care of itself.

He glanced at Rula. The appeal remained in her eyes. He rose, obtained a jar of beer, broke the seal, sipped. "A toast to the windmill." He passed it to Toma.

"Steban, let's get the rest of that water."

A breeze had come up during supper. Cool and moist, it promised rain. Swift clouds were racing toward the mountains, obscuring the stars. Maybe, Tain thought, the weather would give Rula what he could not.

"Mom and Dad are mad at each other, aren't they?"

"I think so."

"Because of the Koskus?"

"Yes." The walk from the spring seemed to grow longer.

"Dad's afraid. Of the Caydarmen." Steban sounded disappointed.

"With good reason, I imagine." Tain hadn't met any of the Baron's mercenaries. He hadn't met any of the neighbors, either. None had come calling. He hadn't done any visiting during his reconnaissances.

"Soldiers aren't ever afraid."

Tain chuckled. "Wrong, Steban. Soldiers are always afraid. We just learn to handle fear. Your Dad didn't have to learn when you lived in the city. He's trying to catch up now."

"I'd show those Caydarmen. Like I showed that wolf."

"There was only one wolf, Steban. There're a lot of Caydarmen."

"Only seven. And the Witch."

"Seven? And a witch?"

"Sure. Torfin. Bodel. Grimmir. Olag. I don't remember the others."

"What about this witch? Who's she?"

Steban wouldn't answer for a while. Then, "She tells them what to do. Dad says the Baron was all right till she went to the

Tower."

"Ah." So. Another fragment of puzzle. Who would have thought this quiet green land, so sparsely settled, could be so taut and mysterious?

Tain tried pumping Steban, but the boy clammed up about the

Baron.

"Do you think Pa's a coward, Tain?"

"No. He came to the Zemstvi. It takes courage for a man to leave everything just on the chance he might

make a better life someplace else."

Steban stopped and stared at him. There had been a lot of emotion in his voice. "Like you did?"

"Yes. Like I did. I thought about it a lone time."

"Oh."

"This ought to be enough water. Let's go back to the house."

He glanced at the sky.

"Going to rain," he said as they went inside.

"Uhm," Toma grunted. He finished one jar and started another. Tain smiled thinly. Kleckla wouldn't be going out tonight. He turned his smile on Rula.

She smiled back. "Maybe you'd better sleep here. The barn leaks."

"I'll be all right. I patched it some yesterday morning."

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"Old habits die hard. Well, the sheep are watered. I'm going to turn in."

"Tain?"

He paused at the door.

"Thanks."

He ducked into the night. Misty raindrops kissed his cheeks. A rising wind quarreled with itself in the grove.

He performed the Soldier's Ritual, then lay back on the straw pallet he had fashioned. But sleep wouldn't come.

VIII

The roan quivered between his knees as they descended the hill. It wasn't because of the wind and cold rain. The animal sensed the excitement and uncertainty of its rider.

Tain guided the roan into a brushy gully, dismounted, told the horse to wait. He moved fifty yards downslope, sat down against a boulder. So still did he remain that he seemed to become one with the stone.

The Kosku stead looked peaceful to an untrained eye. Just a quiet rural place passing a sleepy night.

But Tain felt the wakefulness there. Someone was watching the night. He could taste their fear and determination.

The Caydarmen came an hour later. There were three of them bearing torches. They didn't care who saw them. They came down the hill from behind Tain and passed within fifty yards of him. None noticed him.

Two were big men. The one with the horn helm, on the point. Tain recognized as the Torfin he had seen before. The second was much larger than the first. The third, riding between them, was a slight, small figure in black.

The Witch. Tain knew that before she entered his vision. He had sensed her raw, untrained strength minutes earlier. Now he could feel the dread of her companions.

The wild adept needed to be feared. She was like an untrained elephant, ignorant of her own strength. And in her potential for misuse of the Power she was more dangerous to herself than to anyone she threatened.

Tain didn't doubt that fear was her primary control over the Baron and his men. She would cajole, pout, and hurt, like a spoiled child....

She was very young. Tain could sense no maturity in her at all.

The man with the horns dismounted and pounded the Kosku door with the butt of a dagger. "Kosku. Open in the name of Baron Caydar."

"Go to Hell."

Tain almost laughed.

The reply, spoken almost gently, came from the mouth of a man beyond fear. The Caydarmen sensed it too, and seemed bewildered. That was what amused Tain so.

"Kosku, you've been fined three sheep, three goats, and five geese for talking sedition. We've come to collect."

"The thieves bargain now? You were demanding five, five, and ten the other day."

"Five sheep, five goats, and ten geese, then," Torfin replied, chagrined.

"Get the hell off my land." "Kosku...."

Assessing the voice, Tain identified Torfin as a decent man trapped by circumstance. Torfin didn't want trouble.

"Produce the animals, Kosku," said the second man. "Or I'll come after them."

This one wasn't a decent sort. His tone shrieked bully and sadist. This one wanted Kosku to resist.

"Come ahead, Grimmir. Come ahead." The cabin door flung open. An older man appeared. He leaned

on a long, heavy quarterstaff. "Come to me, you Trolledyngjan dog puke. You sniffer at the skirts of whores."

Kosku, Tain decided, was no ex-clerk. He was old, but the hardness of a man of action glimmered through the grey. His muscles were taut and strong. He would know how to handle his staff.

Grimnir wasn't inclined to test him immediately. The witch urged her mount forward.

"You don't frighten me, little slut. I know you. I won't appease your greed."

Her hands rose before her, black-gloved fingers writhing like snakes. Sudden emerald sparks leapt from tip to tip. Kosku laughed.

His staff darted too swiftly for the eye to follow. Its iron-shod tip struck the Witch's horse between the nostrils.

It shrieked, reared. The woman tumbled into the mud. Green sparks zig-zagged over her dark clothing. She spewed curses like a broken oath-sack.

Torfin swung his torch at the old man.

The staff's tip caught him squarely in the forehead. He sagged.

"Kosku, you shouldn't have done that," Grimnir snarled. He dismounted, drew his sword. The old man fled, slammed his door. Grimnir recovered Torfin's torch, tossed it onto the thatch of Kosku's home. He helped the Witch and Torfin mount, then tossed his own torch.

Tain was inclined to aid the old man, but didn't move. He had left his weapons behind in case he encountered this urge.

He didn't need weapons to fight and kill, but he suspected, considering Kosku's reaction, that Grimnir was good with a sword. It didn't seem likely that an unarmed man could take him.

And there was the Witch, whose self-taught skill he couldn't estimate.

She had had enough. Despite Grimnir's protests, she started back the way they had come.

Tain watched them pass. The Witch's eyes jerked his way, as if she were startled, but she saw nothing. She relaxed. Tain listened them over the ridge before moving.

The wet thatch didn't burn well, but it burned. Tain strode down, filled a bucket from a sheep trough, tossed water onto the blaze. A half dozen throws finished it.

The rainfall was picking up. Tain returned to the roan conscious that eyes were watching him go.

He swung onto the gelding, whispered. The horse began stalking the Caydarmen.

They weren't hurrying. It was two hours before Tain discerned the deeper darkness of the Tower through the rain. His quarry passed inside without his having learned anything. He circled the structure once.

The squat, square tower was only slightly taller than it was wide. It was very old, antedating Iwa Skolovda. Tain assumed that it had been erected by Imperial engineers when Ilkazar had ruled Shara. A watchtower to support patrols in the borderlands.

Shara had always been a frontier.

Similar structures dotted the west. Ilkazar's advance could be chronicled by their architectural styles.

IX

Toma was in a foul mood next morning. Tain avoided him, concentrating on the windmill while Kleckla worked on the house.

Toma was suffering from more than a hangover. Come midmorning he abandoned his tools, donned a jacket and collected his staff. He strode off toward the village.

He had hardly vanished when Rula joined Tain. "Thanks for last night," she said.

Tain spread his hands in a "it was nothing" gesture. "I don't think you had to worry."

"What?"

"Nothing." He averted his gaze shyly.

"He's gone to find out what happened."

"I know. He feels responsible."

"He's not responsible for Kosku's sins."

"We're all responsible to one another, Rula. His feelings are genuine. My opinion is, he wants to do the right thing for the wrong reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I think he wants to prove something. I'm not sure why. Or to whom. Maybe to himself."

"Just because they blame him...." Her gaze snapped up and away, toward the spring. Tain turned slowly.

A Caydarman on a painted horse was descending the slope. Torfin?" Today he wore no helmet.

"Oh!" Rula gasped. "Toma must have said something yesterday."

Tain could sense the unreasoning fear in her. It refused to let the Caydarman be anything but evil. "You go inside. I'll handle him."

She ran.

Tain set his tools aside, wiped his hands, ambled toward the spring. The Caydarman had entered the grove. He was watering his mount.

"Good morning."

The Caydarman looked up. "Good morning."

He's young. Tain thought. Nineteen or twenty. But he has scars.

The youth took in Tain's size and catlike movements.

Tain noted the Caydarman's pale blue eyes and long blond hair, and the strength pent in his rather average-appearing body. He was tall, but not massive like Grimnir.

"Torfin Hakesson," the youth offered. "The Baron's man."

"Tain. My father's name I don't know."

A slight smile crossed Torfin's lips. "You're new here."

"Just passing through. Kleckla needed help with his house. I have the skills. He asked me to stay on for a while."

Torfin nodded. "You're the man with the big roan? I saw you the other day."

Tain smiled. "And I you. Several times. Why're you so far from home?"

"My father chose a losing cause. I drifted. The Baron offered me work. I came to the Zemstvi."

"I've heard that Trolledyngjans are terse. Never have I heard a life so simply sketched."

"And you?"

"Much the same. Leaving unhappiness behind, pursuing something that probably doesn't exist."

"The Baron might take you on."

"No. Our thinking diverges on too many things."

"I thought so myself, once. I still do, in a way. But you don't have many choices when your only talent is swordwork."

"A sad truth. Did you want something in particular?"

"No. Just patrolling. Watering the horse. Them." He jerked his head toward the house. "They're well?"

"Yes."

"Good." The youth eyed the stead. "Looks like you've gotten things moving."

"Some. Toma needed help."

"Yes. He hasn't made much headway since Mikla left. Well, good-day, Tain. Till we meet again."

"Good-day, Torfin. And may the grace of heaven guide you."

Torfin regarded him with one raised eyebrow as he mounted. "You have an odd way of putting things," he replied. He wheeled and angled off across the hillside. Tain watched till the youth crossed the low ridge.

He found Rula hunkered by the cookfire, losing herself in making their noonday meal.

"What did he want?" she demanded.

"To water his horse."

"That's all?"

"That and to look at me, I suppose. Why?"

"He's the dangerous one. Grimnir is big and loud and mean. The others are bullies too. But Torfin. . . . He's quiet and quick. He once killed three of Stojan's warriors when they tried to steal horses from the Tower corrals."

"Has he given you any trouble?"

She hesitated. Tain knew she would hide something.

"No. To hardly anybody. But he's always around. Around and watching. Listening. Then the others come with their fines that aren't anything but excuses to rob people."

So much fear in her. He wanted to hold her, to tell her everything would be all right. "I have to get to work. I should finish the framework today. If Toma remembers to look for lumber, we might start the tank tomorrow." He ducked out before he did anything foolish.

He didn't understand. He was Tain, a leading centurion of the Demon Guard. He was a thirty-year veteran. He should be past juvenile temptations. Especially involving a woman of Rula's age and wear....

He worked hard, but it did no good. The feelings, the urges, remained. He kept his eyes averted during lunch.

"Tain..." she started once.

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

He glanced up. She had turned toward the Tower, her gaze faraway.

Afterward, he saddled the roan and led out the mule and took them on a short patrol. Once he spied Torfin in the distance, on a hilltop, watching something beyond. Tain turned and rode a few miles

westward, till the Tower loomed ahead. He turned again, for home, following a looping course past the Kosku stead. Someone was repairing the thatch.

Rula was waiting, and highly nervous. "Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Exercising the animals. What happened?"

"Nothing. Oh, nothing. I just hate it when I have to be alone."

"I'm sorry. That was thoughtless."

"No. Not really. What claim do I have to your time?" She settled down. "I'm just a worrier."

"Til wait till Toma's home next time." He unsaddled the roan and began rubbing him down. The mule wandered away, grazing. Rula watched without speaking.

He was acutely conscious of her gaze. After ten minutes she asked, "Where did you come from. Tain? Who are you?"

"I came from nowhere and I'm going nowhere, Rula. I'm just an ex-soldier wandering because I don't know anything else."

"Nothing else? You seem to know something about everything."

"I've had a lot of years to learn."

"Tell me about the places you've been. I've never been anywhere but home and the Zemstvi."

Tain smiled a thin, sad smile. There was that same awe and hunger that he heard from Steban.

"I saw Escalon once, before it was destroyed. It was a beautiful country." He described that beauty without revealing his part in its destruction. He worked on the windmill while he reminisced.

"Ah. I'd better start supper," Rula said later. "Toma's coming. He's got somebody with him."

Tain watched her walk away and again chastised himself for unworthy thoughts.

She had been beautiful once, and would be still but for the meanness of her life.

Toma arrived wearing an odd look. Tain feared the man had divined his thoughts. But, "The Caydarmen went after Kosku last night. The old coot actually chased them off."

"Heh?" Tain snorted. "Good for him. You going to be busy?" He glanced at the second man. "Or can you help me mount these bearings?"

"Sure. In a couple minutes. Tain, this's my brother-in-law."

"Mikla?" Tain extended his hand. "Good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"None of it good, I'm sure." Laughter wrinkled the corners of Mikla's eyes. He was a lean, leathery man, accustomed to facing hard weather.

"More good than bad. Steban will be glad to see you."

Rula stuck her head out the door. Then she came flying, skirts aswirl. "Mikla!" She threw her arms around her brother. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick."

"Consorting with the enemy. Staying with Stojan and trying to convince him that we're not all Caydarmen."

"Even Caydarmen don't all seem to be Caydarmen," Tain remarked as he hoisted a timber into position.

Mikla watched the ease with which he lifted. "Maybe not. But when the arrows are flying, who wonders about the spirit in which they're sped?"

"Ah. That's right. Steban said you were a veteran."

A whisper of defensiveness passed through Mikla's stance. "Steban exaggerates what I've already exaggerated silly."

"An honest man. Rare these days. Toma. You said Kosku chased the Caydarmen away? Will that make more trouble?"

"Damned right it will," Mikla growled. "That's why I came back. When the word gets around, everybody in the Zemstvi will have his back up. And those folks at the Tower are going to do their damndest to stop it."

"Kind of leaves me with mixed feelings. I've been saying we ought to do something ever since the Witch turned the Baron's head. But now I wonder if it'll be worth the trouble. It'll cause more than beatings and judicial robberies. Somebody'll get killed."

Probably Kosku."

"I really didn't think it would go this far," Toma murmured. Tain couldn't fathom the pain in Kleckla. "I thought she'd see where she was heading...."

"Enough of this raven-cawing," Mikla shouted. He swept Rula into a savage embrace. "What's for supper, little sister?"

"Same as every night. Mutton stew. What did you expect?"

"That's a good-looking mule over there. She wouldn't miss a flank steak or two."

Rula startled them with a pert, "You'll get your head kicked in for just thinking about it. That's the ornieriest animal I ever saw. She could give mean lessons to Grimnir. But maybe you could talk Tain into fixing supper. He did the other day. It was great."

Tain thought he saw a glimmer of the girl who had married

Toma, of the potential hiding behind the weary mask.

"He cooks, too? Mercy. Toma, maybe you should marry him." Tain watched for visual cues. How much

of Mikla's banter had an ulterior motive? But the man was hard to read.

Rula bounced off to the house with a parting shot about having to poison the stew.

"That story of Kosku's is spreading like the pox," Toma observed. He reassumed the odd look he had worn on arriving.

So, Tain thought. Kosku is talking about the mystery man who doused the fire in his thatch. Was that what had brought Torfin?

"A Caydarman stopped by," he told Kleckla. "Torfin. He watered his horse. We talked."

"What'd he want?"

"Nothing, far as I could tell. Unless he was checking on me. Seemed a pleasant lad."

"He's the one to watch," Mikla declared. "Quiet and deadly. Like a viper."

"Rula told me about Stojan's men."

"Them? They got what they asked for. Stojan didn't like it, but what could he do? Torfin cut them down inside the Baron's corral. He let a couple get away just so they could carry the warning."

"With only seven men in his way I wouldn't think Stojan would care how things looked."

"Neither Stojan's nor Hywel's clans amount to much. They had smallpox bad the year before we came out. Stojan can't get twenty warriors together."

"Steban must have heard the news," Tain observed. "He's coming home early."

The boy outdistanced his flock. Toma hurried to meet him. Tain and Mikla strolled along behind. "What army were you in?" the latter asked.

Tain had faced the question since arriving. But no one had phrased it quite this directly. He had to tell the truth, or lie. A vague reply would be suspicious. "Necremnen." He hoped Mikla was unfamiliar with the nations of the Roe basin.

"Ah." Mikla kept asking pointed questions. Several tight minutes passed before Tain realized that he wasn't fishing for something. The man just had the curiosities. "Your sister. She's not happy here."

"I know." Mikla shrugged. "I do what I can for her. But she's Toma's wife."

And that, thought Tain, told a whole tale about the west. Not that the women of his own nation had life much easier. But their subjugation was cosmeticized and sweetened.

Toma reached Steban. He flung his arms around wildly. Mikla started trotting.

Tain kept walking. He wanted to study Mikla when the man wasn't conscious of being observed.

He was a masculine edition of Rula. Same lean bone structure, same dark brown hair, same angular head. Mikla would be several years older. Say thirty-six. Rula couldn't be more than thirty-three, despite

having been married so long.

The world takes us hard and fast. Tain thought. Suddenly he felt old.

Toma and Mikla came running. "Steban saw smoke," Toma gasped. "Toward Kosku's place. We're going over there." They ran on to the house.

Tain walked after them.

He arrived to find Toma brandishing his quarterstaff. Mikla was scraping clots of earth off a sword he had dug out of the floor.

X

Sorrow invaded Tain's soul. He couldn't repulse it. It persisted while he helped Steban water the sheep, and worsened while he sat with Rula, waiting for the men to return. Hours passed before he identified its root cause. Homesickness.

"I'm exhausted," he muttered. "Better turn in."

Rula sped him a look of mute appeal. He ignored it. He didn't dare wait with her. Not anymore. Not with these unsoldierly feelings threatening to betray all honor.

The Soldier's Rituals did no good. They only reminded him of the life he had abandoned. He was a soldier no more. He had chosen a different path, a different life.

A part of life lay inside the sod house, perhaps his for the asking.

"I'm a man of honor," he mumbled. Desperation choked his voice.

And again his heart leaned to his motherland.

Sighing, he broke into his mule packs. He found his armorer's kit, began oiling his weapons.

But his mind kept flitting, taunting him like a black butterfly. Home. Rula. Home. Rula again.

Piece by piece, with exaggerated care, he oiled his armor. It was overdue. Lacquerwork needed constant, loving care. He had let it slide so he wouldn't risk giving himself away.

He worked with the unhappy devotion of a recruit forewarned of a surprise inspection. It required concentration. The distractions slid into the recesses of his mind.

He was cleaning the eyepieces of his mask when he heard the startled gasp.

He looked up. Rula had come to the barn.

He hadn't heard her light tread.

She stared at the mask. Fascination and horror alternated on her face. Her lips worked. No sound came forth.

Tain didn't move.

This is the end, he thought. She knows what the mask means....

"I . . . Steban fell asleep. ... I thought...." She couldn't tear her gaze away from that hideous metal visage.

She yielded to the impulse to flee, took several steps. Then something drew her back.

Fatalistically, Tain polished the thin traceries of inlaid gold.

"Are you? ... Is that real?"

"Yes, Rula." He reattached the mask to his helmet. "I was a leading centurion of the Demon Guard. The Demon Prince's personal bodyguard." He returned mask and helmet to his mule packs, started collecting the rest of his armor.

He had to go.

"How?...How can that be? You're not?..."

"We're just men, Rula. Not devils." He guided the mule to the packs, threw a pad across her back. "We have our weaknesses and fears too." He threw the first pack on and adjusted it.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't stay now. You know what I was. That changes everything."

"Oh."

She watched till he finished. But when he called the roan, and began saddling him, she whispered. "Tain?" He turned.

She wasn't two feet away.

"Tain. It doesn't matter. I won't tell anyone. Stay." One of his former master's familiar spirits reached into his guts and, with bloody talons, slowly twisted his intestines. It took no experience to read the offer in her eyes. "Please stay. I... We need you here." One treacherous hand overcame his will. He caressed her cheek. She shivered under his touch, hugged herself as if she were cold. She pressed her cheek against his fingers. "Stay?" Her voice was a mouse's whisper. He tried to harden his eyes. "Oh, no. Not now. More than ever."

"Tain. Don't. You can't." Her gaze fell to the straw. Savage quaking conquered her.

She moved toward him. Her arms enveloped his neck. She buried her face in his chest. He felt the warm moistness of tears through his clothing.

He couldn't push her away. "No," he said, and she understood that he meant he wouldn't go.

He separated himself gently and began unloading the mule. He avoided Rula's eyes, and she his whenever he succumbed.

He turned to the roan. Then Mikla's voice, cursing, came from toward Kosku's.

"Better go inside. I'll be there in a minute." Disappointment, pain, anger, fear, played tag across Rula's face. "Yes. All right."

Slowly, going to the Rituals briefly, Tain finished. Maybe later. During the night, when she wouldn't be here to block his path. . . .

Liar, he thought. It's too late now. He went to the house.

Toma and Mikla had arrived. They were opening jars of beer. "It was Kosku's place," Toma said. Hate and anger had him shaking. He was ready to do something foolish.

"He got away," Mikla added. "They're hunting him now. Like an animal. They'll murder him."

"He'll go to Palikov's," Toma said. Mikla nodded. "They're old friends. Palikov is as stubborn as he is."

"They can figure the same as us. The Witch. ..." Mikla glanced at Tain. "She'll tell them." He finished his beer, seized another jar. Toma matched his consumption.

"We could get there first," Toma guessed.

"It's a long way. Six miles." Mikla downed his jar, grabbed another. Tain glanced into the wall pantry. The beer supply was dwindling fast. And it was a strong drink, brewed by the nomads from grain and honey. They traded it for sheepskins and mutton.

"Palikov," said Tain. "He's the one that lives out by the Toad?"

"That's him." Mikla didn't pay Tain much heed. Toma gave him a look that asked why he wanted to know.

"We can't let them get away with it," Kleckla growled. "No! with murder. Enough is enough. This morning they beat the Arimkov girl half to death."

"Oh!" Rula gasped. "She always was jealous of Lari. Over that boy Lief."

"Rula."

"I'm sorry, Toma."

Tain considered the men. They were angry and scared. They had decided to do a deed, didn't know if they could, and felt they had talked too much to back down.

A lot more beer would go down before they marched.

Tain stepped backward into the night, leaving.

XI

He spent fifteen minutes probing the smouldering remnants of Kosku's home and barn. He found something Toma and Mikla had overlooked.

The child's body was so badly burned he couldn't tell its sex.

He had seen worse. He had been a soldier of the Dread Empire. The gruesome corpse moved him less than did the horror of the sheep pens.

The animals had been used for target practice. The raiders hadn't bothered finishing the injured.

Tain did what had to be done. He understood Toma and Mikla better after cutting the throats of lambs and kids.

There was no excuse for wanton destruction. Though the accusation sometimes flew, the legions never killed or destroyed for pleasure.

A beast had left its mark here.

He swung onto the roan and headed toward the Toad.

A wall collapsed behind him. The fire returned to life, splashing the slope with dull red light. Tain's shadow reached ahead, flickering like an uncertain black ghost.

Distance fled. About a mile east of the Kleckla house he detected other night travelers.

Toma and Mikla were walking slowly, steering a wobbly course, pausing frequently to relieve their bladders. They had brought beer with them.

Tain gave them a wide berth. They weren't aware of his passing.

They had guessed wrong in predicting that they would beat the Caydarmen to Palikov's.

Grimnir and four others had accompanied the Witch. Tain didn't see Torfin among them.

The raiders had their heads together. They had tried a torching and had failed. A horse lay between house and nightriders, moaning, with an arrow in its side. A muted Kosku kept cursing the Witch and Caydarmen.

Tain left the roan. He moved downhill to a shadow near the raiders. He squatted, waited.

This time he bore his weapons.

The Toad loomed behind the Palikov home. Its evil god aspect felt believable. It seemed to chuckle over this petty human drama.

Tain touched the hilt of his longsword. He was tempted. Yet... He wanted no deaths. Not now. Not here. This confrontation had to be neutralized, if only to keep Toma and Mikla from stumbling into a situation they couldn't handle.

Maybe he could stop it without bloodshed.

He took flint and steel from his travel pouch. He sealed his eyes, let his chin fall to his chest. He whispered.

He didn't understand the words. They weren't in his childhood tongue. They had been taught him when he was young, during his Aspirant training.

His world shrank till he was alone in it. He no longer felt the breeze, nor the earth beneath his toes. He heard nothing, nor did the light of torches seep through the flesh of his eyelids. The smell of fetid torch smoke faded from his consciousness.

He floated.

He reached out, locating his enemies, visualizing them from a slight elevation. His lips continued to work.

He struck flint against steel, caught the spark with his mind.

Six pairs of eyes jerked his way.

A luminous something grew round the spark, which seemed frozen in time, neither waxing nor dying. The luminosity spread diaphanous wings, floated upward. Soon it looked like a gigantic, glowing moth.

The Witch shrieked. Fear and rage drenched her voice.

Tain willed the moth.

Its wings fluttered like silk falling. The Witch flailed with her hands, could touch nothing. The moth's clawed feet pierced her hood, seized her hair.

Flames sprang up.

The woman screamed.

The moth ascended lightly, fluttered toward Grimnir.

The Caydarman remained immobile, stunned, till his hair caught fire. Then he squealed and ran for his horse.

The others broke a moment later. Tain burned one more, then recalled the elemental.

It was a minor magick, hardly more than a trick, but effective enough as a surprise. And no one died.

One Caydarman came close.

They were a horse short, and too interested in running to share with the man who came up short.

Whooping, old man Kosku stormed from the house. He let an arrow fly. It struck the Caydarman in the shoulder. Kosku would have killed him had Tain not threatened him with the moth.

Tain recalled the spark again. This time it settled to the point it had occupied when the moth had come to life. The elemental faded. The spark fell, dying before it hit ground.

Tain withdrew from his trance. He returned flint and steel to his pouch, rose. "Good," he whispered. "It's done."

He was tired. He hadn't the mental or emotional muscle to sustain extended use of the Power. He wasn't sure he could make it home.

But he had been a soldier of the Dread Empire. He did not yield to weariness.

XII

The fire's smoke hung motionless in the heavy air. Little more than embers remained. The ashes beneath were deep. The little light remaining stirred spooky shadows amongst the odd, conical rocks.

Kai Ling slept soundly. He had made his bed there for so long that his body knew every sharp edge beneath it.

The hillmen sentinels watched without relaxing. They knew this bane too well. They bothered him no more. All they wanted of him was warning time, so their women and children could flee.

Kai Ling sat bolt upright. He listened. His gaze turned west. His head thrust forward. His nose twitched like that of a hound on point. A smile toyed with his lips. He donned his golden panther mask.

The sentinels ran to tell their people that the man-of-death was moving.

XIII

Toma and Mikla slept half the day. Tain labored on the windmill, then the house. He joined Rula for lunch. She followed him when he returned to work.

"What happened to them?" he asked.

"It was almost sunup when they came home. They didn't say anything."

"They weren't hurt?"

"It was over before they got there." The fear edged her voice again, but now she had it under control.

I'm building a mountain of responsibility, Tain thought.

She watched him work a while, admiring the deft way he pegged timbers into place.

He clambered up to check the work Toma had done on the headers. Out of habit he scanned the horizon.

A hill away, a horseman watched the stead. Tain balanced on the header. The rider waved. Tain responded.

Someone began cursing inside the sod house. Rula hurried that way. Tain sighed. He wouldn't have to explain a greeting to the enemy.

Minutes later Mikla came outside. He had a hangover. A jar of beer hung from his left hand.

"Good afternoon," Tain called.

"The hell it is." Mikla came over, leaned against a stud. "Where were you last night?"

"What? Asleep in the barn. Why?"

"Not sure. Toma!"

Toma came outside. He looked worse than his brother-in-law. "What?"

"What'd old man Kosku say?"

"I don't know. Old coot talked all night. I quit listening to him last year."

"About the prowler who ran the Caydarmen off."

"Ah. I don't remember. A black giant sorcerer? He's been seeing things for years. I don't think he's ever sober."

"He was sober last night. And he told the same story the first time they tried burning him out."

Toma shrugged. "Believe what you want. He's just crazy." But Toma considered Tain speculatively.

"Someone coming," Tain said. The runner was coming from the direction of the Kosku stead. Soon Toma and Mikla could see him too.

"That's Wes. Kosku's youngest," Toma said. "What's happened now?"

When the boy reached the men, he gasped, "It's Dad. He's gone after Olag."

"Calm down," Mikla told him, "Catch your breath first." The boy didn't wait long. "We went back to the house. To see if we could save anything. We found Mari. We thought she ran to Jeski's. . . . She was all burned. . . . Then Ivon Pilsuski came by. He said Olag was in town. He was bragging about teaching Dad a lesson. So Dad went to town. To kill him." Tain sighed. It seemed unstoppable now. There was blood in it.

Toma looked at Mikla. Mikla stared back. "Well?" said Toma.

"It's probably too late."

"Are you going?"

Mikla rubbed his forehead, pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Yes. All right." He went to the house. Toma followed.

The two came back. Mikla had his sword. Toma had his staff. They walked round the corner of the house, toward the village, without speaking.

Rula flew outside. "Tain! Stop them! They'll get killed."

He seized her shoulders, held her at arm's length. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. You're.... You mean you won't." Something had broken within her. Her fear had returned. The raid had affected her the way the Caydarmen wanted it to effect the entire Zemstvi.

"I mean I can't. I've done what I could. There's blood in it now. It'll take blood to finish it."

"Then go with them. Don't let anything happen to them."

Tain shook his head sadly. He had gotten himself cornered here.

He had to go. To protect a man who claimed the woman he wanted. If he didn't, and Toma were killed, he would be forever asking himself if he had willed it to happen.

He sealed his eyes briefly, then avoided Rula's by glancing at the sky. Cloudless and blue, it recalled the day when last he had killed a man. There, away toward Kosku's, Death's daughters planed the air, omening more dying.

"All right." He went to the Kosku boy, who sat by the new house, head between his knees.

"Wes. We're going to town. Will you stay with Mrs. Kleckla?"

"Okay." The boy didn't raise his head.

Tain walked toward the barn. "Take care of him, Rula. He needs mothering now."

Toma and Mikla traveled fast. Tain didn't overtake them till they were near the village. He stayed out of sight, riding into town after them. He left the roan near the first house.

There were two horses in the village. Both belonged to Caydarmen. He ignored them.

Kosku and a Caydarman stood in the road, arguing viciously. The whole village watched. Kosku waved a skinning knife.

Tain spotted the other Caydarman. Grimnir leaned against a wall between two houses, grinning. The big man wore a hat to conceal his hairless pate.

Tain strolled his way as Mikla and Toma bore down on Olag. Olag said something. Kosku hurled himself at the Caydarman. Blades flashed. Kosku fell. Olag kicked him, laughed. The old man moaned.

Mikla and Toma charged. The Caydarman drew his sword. Grimmir, still grinning, started to join him. Tain seized his left bicep. "No."

Grimmir tried to yank away. He failed. He tried punching himself loose. Tain blocked the blow, backhanded Grimmir across the face. "I said no."

Grimmir paused. His eyes grew huge. "Don't move. Or I'll kill you." Grimmir tried for his sword. Tain tightened his grip, Grimmir almost whimpered. And in the road Tain's oracle became fact. Mikla had been a soldier once, but now he was as rusty as his blade. Olag battered his sword aside, nicked him. Toma thrust his staff at the Caydarman's head. Olag brushed it away.

Tain sighed sadly. "Grimmir, walk down the road. Get on your horse. Go back to the Tower. Do it now, or don't expect to see the sun set." He released the man's arm. His hand settled to the pommel of his longsword.

Grimmir believed him. He hurried to his horse, one hand holding his hat.

Olag glanced his way, grinned, shouted, "Hey, join the game, big man." He seemed puzzled when Grimmir galloped away.

Tain started toward Olag.

Toma went down with a shoulder wound. Mikla had suffered a dozen cuts. Olag was playing with him. The fear was in him now. His pride had neared its snapping point. In a moment he would run.

"Stop it," Tain ordered.

Olag stepped back, considered him from a red tangle of hair and beard. He licked his lips and smiled. "Another one?"

He buried his blade in Mikla's guts.

Tain's swords sang as they cleared their scabbards. The evening sun played purple and indigo upon their blades.

Olag stopped grinning.

He was good. But the Caydarman had never faced a man doubly armed.

He fell within twenty seconds.

The villagers stared, awed. The whispers started, speculating about Kosku's mystery giant. Tain ignored them.

He dropped to one knee.

It was too late for Mikla. Toma, though, would mend. But his shoulder would bother him for the rest of

his life.

Tain tended Kleckla's wound, then whistled for the roan. He set Toma in the saddle and laid Mikla behind him. He cleaned his blades on the dead Caydarman.

He started home.

Toma, in shock, stared at the horizon and spoke not a word.

XIV

Rula ran to meet them. How she knew Tain couldn't fathom.

Darkness had fallen.

Steban was a step behind her, face taut and pallid. He looked at his father and uncle and retreated into an inner realm nothing could assail.

"I'm sorry, Rula. I wasn't quick enough. The man who did it is dead, if that helps." Honest grief moved him. He slid his arm around her waist.

Steban slipped under his other arm. They walked down to the sod house. The roan followed, his nose an inch behind Tain's right shoulder. The old soldier took comfort from the animal's concern.

They placed Mikla on a pallet, and Toma in his own bed. "How bad is he?" Rula asked, moving and talking like one of the living dead.

Tain knew the reaction. The barriers would relax sometime. Grief would demolish her. He touched her hand lightly. "He'll make it. It's a clean wound. Shock is the problem now. Probably more emotional than physical."

Steban watched with wide, sad eyes.

Tain squatted beside Toma, cleansing his wound again. "Needle and thread, Rula. He'll heal quicker."

"You're a surgeon too?"

"I commanded a hundred men. They were my responsibility."

The fire danced suddenly. The blanket closing the doorway whipped. Cold air chased itself round the inside walls. "Rain again," Rula said.

Tain nodded. "A storm, I think. The needle?"

"Oh. Yes."

He accepted needle and thread. "Steban. Come here."

The boy drifted over as if gripped by a narcotic dream.

"Sit. I need your help."

Steban shook his head.

"You wanted to be a soldier. I'll start teaching you now."

Steban lowered himself to the floor.

"The sad lessons are the hardest. And the most important. A soldier has to watch friends die. Put your fingers here, like this. Push. No. Gently. Just enough to keep the wound shut." Tain threaded the needle.

"Uncle Mikla. . . How did it happen?" Disbelief animated the boy. His uncle could do anything.

"He forgot one of a soldier's commandments. He went after an enemy he didn't know. And he forgot that it's been a long time since he used a sword."

"Oh."

"Hold still, Steban. I'm going to start."

Toma surged up when the needle entered his flesh. A moan ripped from his throat. "Mikla! No!" His reason returned with his memory.

"Toma!" Tain snapped. "Lie down. Rula, help us. He's got to lie still."

Toma struggled. He started bleeding.

Steban gagged.

"Hold on, Steban. Rula, get down here with your knees beside his head. Toma, can you hear me?"

Kleckla stopped struggling. He met Tain's eyes.

"I'm trying to sew you up. You have to hold still."

Rula ran her fingers over Toma's features.

"Good. Try to relax. This won't take a minute. Yes. Good thinking, Steban."

The boy had hurled himself away, heaved, then had taken control. He returned with fists full of wool. Tain used it to sponge blood.

"Hold the wound together, Steban."

The boy's fingers quivered when the blood touched them, but he persevered.

"Good. A soldier's got to do what's got to be done, like it or not. Toma? I'm starting."

"Uhm."

The suturing didn't take a minute. The bandaging took no longer.

"Rula. Make some broth. He'll need lots of it. I'm going to the barn. I'll get something for the pain. Steban. Wash your hands."

The boy was staring at his father's blood on his fingers.

A gust of wind stirred fire and door covering. The wind was cold. Then an avalanche of rain fell. A more solid sound counterpointed the patter of raindrops.

"Hailstones," Rula said.

"I have to get my horse inside. What about the sheep?"

"Steban will take care of them. Steban?"

Thunder rolled across the Zemstvi. Lightning scarred the night. The sheep bleated.

"Steban! Please! Before they panic."

"Another lesson, Steban." Tain guided the boy out the door. "You've got to go on, no matter what."

The rain was cold and hard. It fell in huge drops. The hailstones stung, the thunder and lightning picked up. The wind had claws of ice. It tore at gaps in Tain's clothing. He guided the roan into the rude barn. The gelding's presence calmed the mule and cow. Tain rifled his packs by lightning flashes.

Steban drove the sheep into the barn too. They would be crowded, but sheltered.

Tain went to help.

He saw the rider in the flashes, coming closer in sudden jerks. The man lay against his mount's neck, hiding from the wind. His destination could be nowhere but the stead.

Tain told Steban. "Take this package to your mother. Tell her to wait till I come in."

Steban scampered off.

Tain backed into the lee of the barn. He waited.

The rider passed the spring. "Torfin. Here."

The paint changed direction. The youth swung down beside Tain. "Oh, what a night. What're you doing out in it, friend?"

"Getting the sheep inside."

"All right for a Caydarman to come in out of it?"

"You picked the wrong time, Torfin. But come on. Crowd the horse inside."

Lightning flashed. Thunder rolled. The youth eyed Tain. The ex-soldier still wore his shortsword.

"What happened?"

"You haven't been to the Tower?"

"Not for a couple days."

"Torfin, tell me. Why do you hang around here? How come you're always watching Steban graze sheep?"

"Uh... The Klecklas deserve better."

Tain helped with the saddle. "Better than what?"

"I see. They haven't told you. But they'd hide their shame, wouldn't they?"

"I don't understand."

"The one they call the Witch. She's their daughter Shirl."

"Lords of Darkness!"

"That's why they have no friends."

"But you don't blame them?"

"When the Children of Hell curse someone with the Power, is that a parent's fault? No. I don't blame them. Not for that. For letting her become a petulant, spoiled little thief, yes. I do. The Power-cursed choose the right or left hand path according to personality. Not so?"

"It's debatable. They let me think she was dead."

"They pretend that. It's been a little over a year since she cast her spell on the Baron. She thought he'd take her to Iwa Skolovda and make her a great lady. But she doesn't understand politics. The Baron can't go back. And now she can't come home. Now she's trying to buy a future by stealing."

"How old are you, Torfin?"

"Nineteen, I think. Too old."

"You sound older. I think I like you."

"I'm a Caydarman by chance, not inclination."

"I think you've had pain from this too."

A wan smile crossed Torfin's lips. "You make me wonder. Do you read minds? What are you, carrying such a sword?" When Tain didn't respond, he continued bitterly. "Yes, there's pain in it for Torfin Hakesson. I was in love with Shirl. She used me. To get her into the Tower."

"That's sad. We'd better go in. Be careful. They're not going to be glad to see you. Caydarmen burned the Kosku place. One of his girls was killed."

"Damn! But it was bound to happen, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And that was just the beginning. Kosku went after Olag and Grimmir. He was killed too."

"Which one did it?"

"Too late. Olag, but he's dead too. He killed Mikla and wounded Toma first, though."

"Help me with the saddle. I can't stay."

"Stay. Maybe together we can stop the bloodshed here."

"I can't face them. They already hate me. Because of Shirl."

"Stay. Tomorrow we'll go to the Tower. We'll see the Baron himself. He can stop it."

"Mikla lived with Stojan's daughter. The old man will want to avenge him."

"All the more reason to stop it here."

Torfin thought again. "All right. You didn't cut me down. Maybe you have a man's heart."

Tain smiled. "I'll guard your back, Trolledyngjan."

XV

Rula and Toma were talking in low, sad tones. Tain pushed through the doorway. Silence descended.

Such hatred! "Torfin will stay the night. We're going to the Tower in the morning. To talk to the Baron." Tain glared, daring opposition.

Toma struggled up. "Not in my house."

"Lie down, damn it. Your pride and fear have caused enough trouble."

Toma said nothing. Rula tensed as if to spring.

"Tain!" Steban whined.

"Torfin has said some hard things about himself. He's almost too eager to take his share of responsibility. He's willing to try to straighten things out.

"In no land I know does a father let his daughter run away and just cry woe. A man is responsible for his

children, Toma. You could have gone after her. But it's easier to play like she's dead, and the Witch of the Tower has nothing to do with you. You sit here hating the Baron and refuse to admit your own part in creating the situation...."

He stopped. He had slipped into his drillmaster's voice. Pointless. Recruits had to listen, to respond, to correct. These westerners had no tradition of personal responsibility. They were round-eyes. They blamed their misfortunes on external forces....

Hadn't Toma blamed Mikla? Didn't Rula accuse Toma?

"That's all. I can't do any good shouting. Torfin is spending the night. Rula. Steban gave you a package."

She nodded. She refused to speak.

"Thank you."

For an instant he feared she hadn't understood. But the packet came with a murmured, "It's all right. I'll control my feelings."

"Is the broth ready?" He felt compelled to convince Rula.

She ladled a wooden bowl full. "Tain."

"Uhm."

"Don't expect me to stop feeling."

"I don't. I feel too. Too much. I killed a man today. A man I didn't know, for no better reason than because I responded to feelings. I don't like that, Rula."

She looked down, understanding.

Steban chimed, "But you were a soldier...."

"Steban, a soldier is supposed to keep the peace, not start wars." The almost-lie tasted bitter. The Dread Empire interpreted that credo rather obliquely. Yet Tain had believed he was living it while marching to conquest after conquest. Only when Shinsan turned upon itself did he question his commanders.

"Tain. . . ." There was a life's worth of pain in Steban's voice.

"People are going to get killed if we don't stop it, Steban." Tain tapped herbs into Toma's broth. "Your friends. Maybe there are only six Caydarmen. Maybe they could be beaten by shepherds. But what happens when the Baron has to run?" He hoped Toma was paying attention. Steban didn't care about the long run.

Toma's eyes remained hard. But he listened. Tain had won that much respect.

"Governments just won't tolerate rebellion. It doesn't matter if it's justified. Overthrow the Baron and you'll have an army in the Zemstvi."

Toma grunted.

Rula shrieked, "Tain!"

He whirled, disarmed Steban in an eye's blink. Torfin nodded in respect. "Thank you."

"Steban," Toma gasped. "Come here."

"Dad, he's a Caydarman!"

Tain pushed the boy. A soul-searing hatred burned in his young eyes. He glared at Mikla, Torfin, and Tain.

Tain suddenly felt tired and old. What was he doing? Why did he care? It wasn't his battle.

His eyes met Rula's. Through the battle of her soul flickered the feelings she had revealed the day before. He sighed. It was his battle.

He had killed a man. There was blood in it. He couldn't run away.

XVI

"I want to see Shirl," Rula declared next morning. "I'm going too."

"Mom!" Steban still didn't understand. He wouldn't talk to Tain, and Torfin he eyed like a butcher considering a carcass.

Tain responded, "First we take care of Mikla. Steban. The sheep. Better pasture them." To Toma, "Going to need sheds. That barn's too crowded."

Toma didn't reply. He did take his breakfast broth without difficulty.

He finally spoke when Steban refused to graze the sheep. "Boy, come here."

Steban went, head bowed.

"Knock it off. You're acting like Shirl. Pasture the sheep. Or I'll paddle your tail all the way out there."

Steban ground his teeth, glared at Tain. And went.

Rula insisted that Mikla lie beside the new home's door. Tain and Torfin took turns digging.

Tain went inside. "We're ready. Toma. You want to go out?"

"I've got to. It's my fault.... I have to watch him go down. So I'll remember."

Tain raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I thought about what you said. I don't like it, but you're right. Four dead are enough."

"Good. Torfin! Help me carry Toma."

It was a quiet burial. Rula wept softly. Toma silently stared his brother-in-law into the ground. Neither Torfin nor Tain spoke. There were no appropriate words.

Tain saddled the roan and threw a pad on the mule. He spoke to her soothingly, reassuringly.

He knelt beside Toma while Torfin readied the paint. "You'll be all right?"

"Just leave me some beer. And some soup and bread."

"All right."

"Tain?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck."

"Thanks, Toma."

The mule accepted Rula's weight, though ungraciously. Tain donned his weapons. Little was said. Tain silently pursued his Morning Ritual. He hadn't had time earlier. Torfin watched. He and Rula couldn't talk. There were too many barriers between them.

The Tower was a growing, squat, dark block filled with frightening promise. A single vermillion banner waved over its ramparts. A feather of smoke curled from an unseen chimney.

"Something's wrong." Torfin remarked. They were a quarter mile away. "I don't see anybody."

Tain studied their surroundings.

Sheep and goats crowded the pens clinging to the Tower's skirts. Chickens and geese ran free. Several scrawny cattle, a mule, and some horses grazed nearby.

No human was visible.

"There should be a few women and children," Torfin said. "Watching the stock."

"Let's stop here."

"Why?" Rula asked.

"Beyond bowshot. Torfin, you go ahead."

The youth nodded. He advanced cautiously. The closer he drew, the lower he hunched in his saddle.

"Rula, stay here." Tain kicked the roan, began trotting round the Tower. Torfin glanced back. He paused

at the Tower gate, peered through, dismounted, drew his sword, went in.

"Whoa." The roan stopped. Tain swung down, examined the tracks.

"Six horses," he murmured. "One small." He leapt onto the roan, galloped toward the Tower gate. "Torfin!" He beckoned Rula.

Torfin didn't hear him. Tain dismounted, peered through the gate into a small interior court. Quarters for the garrison had been built against the bailey walls.

"What is it?" Rula asked.

"Six riders left this morning. The Witch and the other five Caydarmen, probably."

Rula's cheek twitched. She wove her fingers together. "What about the people here?"

"Let's find Torfin."

The youth appeared above. "They're up here." He sounded miserable.

Tain guided Rula up the perilous stair. Torfin met them outside a doorway.

"In here. They saw us coming."

Tain heard muted weeping.

"Trouble." Torfin explained. "Bad trouble."

"I saw the tracks."

"Worse than that. She'll be able to cut loose for real...." The youth pushed the door. Frightened faces peered out at Tain.

The three women weren't Trolledyngjan. And their children were too old to have been fathered by the mercenaries.

Tain had seen those faces countless times, in countless camps. Women with children, without husbands, who attached themselves to an occupying soldiery. They were always beaten, tired, frightened creatures.

Mothers and children retreated to one corner of the spartan room. One woman brandished a carving knife. Tain showed his palms. "Don't be afraid. We came to see Baron Caydar."

Rula tried a smile. Torfin nodded agreement. "It's all right. They mean no harm."

The knife-woman opened a path.

Tain got his first glimpse of Caydar.

The Baron lay on a pallet in the corner. He was a spare, short man, bald, with a scraggly beard. He was old, and he was dying.

This was what Torfin had meant by saying the trouble was big. There would be no brake on the Witch with the Baron gone. "Torfin. Move them. I'll see if I can do anything."

The Baron coughed. It was the first of a wracking series. Bloody froth dribbled down his chin.

Torfin gestured. The Tower people sidled like whipped dogs. Tain knelt by the old man. "How long has he been sick?"

"Always. He seldom left this room. How bad is it?"

"Rula. In my left saddle bag. The same leather packet I had when I treated Toma." She left. "He'll probably go before sundown. But I'll do what I can."

"Tain, if he dies.... Grimmir and the others.... They'd rather take the Witch's orders. Her style suits them better."

Tain checked the Baron's eyes and mouth, dabbed blood, felt his chest. There was little left of Caydar. "Torfin. Anyone else shown these symptoms?"

"I don't think so."

"They will. Probably the girl, if she's been intimate with him."

Rula reappeared. She heard. "What is it?"

"Tuberculosis."

"No. Tain, she's only a child."

"Disease doesn't care. And you could say she's earned it."

"No. That isn't fair."

"Nothing's fair, Rula. Nothing. Torfin. Find out where she went." Tain took the packet from Rula, concentrated on Caydar.

He left the room a half hour later, climbed the ladder to the ramparts. Hands clasped behind him, he stared at the green of the Zemstvi.

A beautiful land, he thought. About to be sullied with blood.

Fate, with a malicious snicker, had squandered the land's last hope.

Torfin followed him. "They're not sure. She just led them out."

"Probably doesn't matter. It's too late. Unless. ..."

"What?"

"We smash the snake's head."

"What? He's going to die? You can't stop it?"

"No. And that leaves Shirl."

"You saying what I think?"

"She has to die."

Torfin smiled thinly. "Friend, she wouldn't let you do it. And if she couldn't stop you with the Power, I'd have to with the sword."

Tain locked eyes with the youth. Torfin wouldn't look away. "She means a lot to you, eh?"

"I still love her."

"So," Tain murmured. "So. Can you stand up to her? Can you bully the others into behaving themselves?"

"I can try."

"Do. I'm into this too deep, lad. If you don't control her, I'll try to stop her the only way I know." He turned to stare across the Zemstvi again.

Though the Tower wasn't tall, it gave a view of the countryside matched only from the Toad. That grim formation was clearly visible. The rain had cleared the air.

Someone was running toward the Tower, Beyond, a fountain of smoke rose against the backdrop formed by the Dragon's Teeth.

A distance-muted thunderclap smote the air. "That's your place," Torfin said softly.

XVII

A man in black, wearing a golden mask, rounded a knoll. He paused above the Palikov stead. Bloody dawnlight leaked round the Toad. It splashed him as he knelt, feeling the earth. It made his mask more hideous. The faceted ruby eyepieces seemed to catch fire.

Thin fingers floated on the air, reaching, till they pointed westward. The man in black rose and started walking. His fingers led him on.

He went slowly, sensing his quarry's trail. It was cold. Occasionally he lost it and had to circle till he caught it again.

The sun scaled the sky. Kai Ling kept walking. A gentle, anticipatory smile played behind his mask.

The feel of the man was getting stronger. He was getting close. It was almost done. In a few hours he would be home. The Tervola would be determining the extent of his reward.

He crossed a low hilltop and paused.

A shepherd's stead lay below. He reached out....

One man, injured, lay within the crude sod house. A second life-spark lurked in the grove surrounding the nearby spring.

And there were six riders coming in from the southwest.

One seized his attention. She corruscated with a stench of wild, untrained Power.

"Lords of Darkness," Kai Ling whispered. "She's almost as strong as the Demon Princess." He crouched, becoming virtually invisible in a patch of gorse.

Five of the riders dismounted. They heaped kindling round the timbers of a partially finished house.

A man staggered from the sod structure. "Shirl!" he screamed. "For god's sake..."

A raider tripped him, slipped a knife into his back as he wriggled on the earth.

Kai Ling stirred slightly as two blasts of emotion exploded below.

A child burst from the grove, shrieking, running toward the killer. And the wild witch lashed the man with a whip. He screamed louder than the boy.

Kai Ling reeled back from the raw surge. She was as strong as the Prince's daughter. But extremely young and undisciplined.

He stood.

The tableau froze.

The boy thought quickest. He paused only a second, then whirled and raced away.

The others regarded Kai Ling for half a minute. Then the witch turned her mount toward him. He felt the uncertainty growing within her.

Kai Ling let his Aspirant's senses roam the stead. The barn stood out. That was his man's living place. But he was gone.

Faceted rubies tracked the fleeing boy. Lips smiled behind gold. "Bring him to me, child," he whispered.

The raiders formed a line shielding the woman. Swords appeared. Kai Ling glanced at the boy. He waited.

She felt him now, he knew. She knew there had been sorcery in the Zemstvi. She would be wondering....

A raider wheeled suddenly. Kai Ling could imagine his words.

He had been recognized.

He folded his arms.

What would she try?

The fire gnawed at the new house. Smoke billowed up. Kai Ling glanced westward. The child had disappeared.

The witch's right arm thrust his way. Pale fire sparkled amongst her fingertips.

He murmured into his mask, readying his defenses.

She was a wild witch. Untrained. She had only intuitive control of the Power. Her emotions would effect what little control she had. He remained unworried despite her strength.

Kai Ling underestimated the size of the channel fear could open in her. She hit him with a blast that nearly melted his protection.

He fell to his knees.

He forced his hands together.

Thunder rolled across the Zemstvi. The timbers of the burning house leapt into the air, tumbled down like a lazy rain of torches. The sod house twisted, collapsed. The barn canted dangerously. The cow inside bawled.

The witch toppled from her horse, screaming, clawing her ears. She thrashed and wailed till a raider smacked her unconscious.

The Caydarmen looked uphill. Kai Ling, though unconscious, remained upon his knees. Golden fire burned where his face belonged. They tossed the witch aboard her horse, fled.

Kai Ling eventually fell forward into the gorse, vanishing.

Then only the flames moved on the Kleckla stead, casting dancing color onto the man whose dreams were dying with him.

XVIII

Tain pushed the roan. He met Steban more than a mile from the Tower. The boy was exhausted, but his arms and legs kept pumping.

"Tain!" he called. "Tain, they killed Pa." He spoke in little bursts, between lung-searing gasps.

"You go on to your mother. She's at the Tower. Come on. Go." He kicked the roan to a gallop.

Steban didn't reach the Tower. Rula, having conquered Tain's mule, met him. She pulled him up behind

her and continued toward her home.

Tain saw the Caydarmen to the south, but didn't alter course. He would find them when their time came.

It was too late now. Absolutely too late. He had switched allegiance from peace to blood. He would kill them. The Witch would go last. After she saw her protectors stripped away. After she learned the meaning of terror.

He was an angry, unreasoning man. Only craft and cunning remained.

He knew he couldn't face her wild magic armed only with long and shortsword. To do so he had to resume his abandoned identity. He had to become a soldier of the Dread Empire once more. A centurion's armor bore strong protective magicks.

What amazing fear would course through the Zemstvi!

He pulled up when he topped the last hill.

The after-smell of sorcery tainted the air round the stead. The familiar stench of the Dread Empire overrode that of the Witch....

He hurled himself from the horse into the shelter of small bushes. His swords materialized in his hands. His emotions perished like small flames in a sudden deluge. He probed with Aspirant senses.

They had come. Because of the civil war he hadn't believed they would bother. He had fooled himself. They couldn't just let him go, could they? Not a centurion with his background. He could be too great a boon to potential enemies.

The heirs of the Dread Empire, both the Demon Princess and the Dragon Prince, aspired to western conquests.

Tain frowned. Sorceries had met here. The eastern had been victorious. So what had become of the victor?

He waited nearly fifteen minutes, till certain the obvious trap wasn't there. Only then did he enter the yard.

He couldn't get near Toma. The flames were too hot.

Kleckla was beyond worry anyway.

Tain was calm. His reason was at work. He had surprised himself in the jaws of a merciless vice.

One was his determination to rid the Zemstvi of the Witch and her thieves. The other was the hunter from home, who would be a man stronger than he, a highly ranked Candidate or Select.

Where was he? Why didn't he make his move?

Right now, just possibly, he could get away. If he obscured his trail meticulously and avoided using the Power again, he might give his past the slip forever. But if he hazarded the Tower, there would be no chance whatsoever. He would have to use the Power. The hunter would pin him down, and come when

he was exhausted....

Life had been easier when he hadn't made his own decisions. Back then it hadn't mattered if a task were perilous or impossible. All he had had to do was follow orders.

He released the old cow, recovered his mule packs. He stared at them a long time, as if he might be able to exhume a decision from their contents.

He heard a noise. His hands flew to his swords.

Rula, Steban, and the mule descended the hill.

Tain relaxed, waited.

Rula surveyed the remains. "This's the cost of conciliation." There was no venom in her voice.

"Yes." He searched her empty face for a clue. He found no help there.

"Rula, they've sent somebody after me. From the east. He's in the Zemstvi now. I don't know where. He was here. He chased the Caydarmen off. I don't know why. I don't know who he is. I don't know how he thinks. But I know what his mission is. To take me home."

Steban said, "I saw him."

"What?"

"A stranger. I saw him. Over there. He was all in black. He had this ugly mask on...."

A brief hope flickered in Tain's breast.

"The mask. What did it look like? What were his clothes like?"

Steban pouted. "I only saw him for a second. He scared me. I ran."

"Try to think. It's important. A soldier has to remember things, Steban. Everything."

"I don't think I want to be a soldier anymore."

"Come on. Come on." Tain coaxed him gently, and in a few minutes had drawn out everything Steban knew.

"Kai Ling. Can't be anybody else." His voice was sad.

"You know him?" Rula asked.

"I knew him. He was my best friend. A long, long time ago. When we were Steban's age."

"Then...."

"Nothing. He's still a Tervola Aspirant. He's been given a mission. Nothing will deflect him. He might shed a tear for our childhood afterward. He was always too emotional for his chosen path."

She surveyed his gear while he helped Steban off the mule. "You mean you have to run to have a chance?"

"Yes."

"Then run. Anything you did now would be pointless anyway."

"No. A soldier's honor is involved. To abandon a task in the face of a secondary danger would be to betray a code which has been my life. I'm a soldier. I can't stop being one. And soldiers of the Dread Empire don't retreat. We don't flee because we face defeat. There may be purpose in sacrifice. We withdraw only if ordered."

"There's nobody to order you. You could go. You're your own commander now."

"I know. That's why it's so difficult."

"I can't help you, Tain." The weight of Toma's demise had begun to crack her barriers against grief.

"You can. Tell me what you'll do."

"About what?"

He indicated the steed. "You can't stay. Can you?"

She shrugged.

"Will you go with me if I go?"

She shrugged again. The grief was upon her now. She wasn't listening.

Tain massaged his aching temples, then started unpacking his armor.

Piece by piece, he became a leading centurion of the Demon Guard. Steban watched with wide eyes. He recognized the armor. The legions were known far beyond lands that had endured their unstoppable passing.

Tain donned his helmet, his swords and witch kit. He paused with his mask in hand. Rula said nothing. She stared at Toma, remembering.

Tain shook his head, donned the mask, walked to the roan. He started toward the Tower.

He didn't look back.

The armor began to feel comfortable. The roan pranced along, glad to be a soldier's steed once more. He felt halfway home....

What he had said penetrated Rula's brain soon after he passed out of view. She glanced round in panic.

The mule remained. As did all Tain's possessions except his weapons and armor. "He left his things!"

Quiet tears dribbled from Steban's eyes. "Ma. I don't think he expects to come back. He thinks he's going to die."

"Steban, we've got to stop him."

XIX

Tain came to the dark tower in the day's last hour. Caydarmen manned its ramparts. An arrow dropped from the sky. It whistled off his armor.

Torfin stood beside the Witch. Tain heard her say, "He's not the same one. He wore robes. And walked."

And Torfin responded, awed, "It's Tain. The man who stayed with your father."

There was no thought in the old soldier. He was a machine come to destroy the Tower. He let decades of combat schooling guide him.

He began with the gate.

From his witch pouch he drew a short, slim rod and a tiny glass vial. He thrust the rod into the vial, making sure the entire shaft was moist. He spoke words he had learned long ago.

Fire exploded in his hand. He hurled a flaming javelin.

It flew perfectly flat, immune to gravity. It struck the gate, made a sound like the beating of a brass gong.

Timbers flew as the gate shattered.

Caydarmen scrambled down from the ramparts.

Tain returned to his pouch. He removed the jar and silver box he had used in the pass. He greased his hands, obtained one of the deadly peas. He concentrated, breathed. The cerulean glow came into being. He hurled a fiery blue ball upward.

It rose slowly, drifted like gossamer toward the ramparts.

The Witch didn't recognize her peril until too late. The ball jumped at her, enveloping her left hand.

She screamed.

Torfin bellowed, followed his confederates downstairs.

Tain dismounted and strode through the gate.

Grimnir met him first. Fear filled the big man's eyes. He fought with desperate genius.

And he died.

As did his comrades, though they tried to team against the man in black.

Trolledyngjans were feared throughout the west. They were deadly fighters. These were amazed by their own ineffectuality. But they had never faced a soldier of the Dread Empire, let alone a leading centurion of the Demon Guard.

The last fell. Tain faced Torfin. "Yield, boy," he said, breaking battle discipline. "You're the one good man in this viper's nest. Go."

"Release her." The youth indicated the ramparts. The girl's screams had declined to moans. She had begun fighting the ball Tain knew she had the strength to beat it, if she could find and harness it.

He smiled. If she failed, she would die. Even if she succeeded, she would never be the same. No matter what happened to him, he had won something. At her age pain could be a powerful purgative for evil.

Still, he had to try to make the solution absolute. "Stand aside, Torfin. You can't beat me."

"I have to try. I love her, Tain."

"You're no good to her dead."

At the bottom of it, Torfin was Trolledyngjan. Like Tain, he could be nothing but what he was. Trolledyngjans were stubborn, inflexible, and saw all settlements, finally, in terms of the stronger sword.

Torfin fell into a slight crouch, presenting his blade. He carried a dagger in his off hand, close to his body. Tain's previous opponents hadn't used that method.

"Torfin... "

The youth shuffled closer. He swung his blade in a tentative figure eight.

Tain nodded, began murmuring the Battle Ritual. He had to relax, to give his reflexes complete control. Torfin was more skilled than his confederates. He was young and quick.

He shrieked and lunged.

Tain turned his rush in silence. The soldiers of Shinsan fought, and died, without a word or cry. Their silence had unnerved men more experienced than Torfin.

Tain's cool, wordless competence told. Torfin retreated a step, then another and another. Sweat ran down his forehead.

Tain's shortsword flicked across and pinked Torfin's left hand. The dagger flew away. The youth had used the weapon cunningly, wickedly. Its neutralization had been Tain's immediate goal.

Torfin danced away, sucked his wound. He looked into faceted crystal and knew the old soldier had spoken the truth when claiming he couldn't be beaten.

Both glanced upward. Shir's moans were fading.

Tain advanced, engaging with his longsword while forcing Torfin to give ground to the short. Torfin reached the ladder to the ramparts. He scrambled up.

Tain pursued him mercilessly, despite the disadvantage. The youth was a natural swordsman. Even against two blades he kept his guard almost impenetrable.

Tain pushed. Torfin was relying on youth's stamina, hoping he would tire.

Tain wouldn't. He could still spend a day in his hot armor, matching blows with the enemy. He hadn't survived his legion years by yielding to fatigue.

Tain stepped onto the battlements. Torfin had lost his last advantage. Tain paused to glance at the Witch.

The blue ball had eaten half her arm. But she was getting the best of it. Only a few sparks still gnawed at her mutilated flesh.

She looked extremely young and vulnerable.

Torfin looked too.

Tain feinted with the longsword, struck with the short.

It was his best move.

Torfin's blade tumbled away into the courtyard. Blood stained both of his hands now.

He backed away quickly, seized a dagger his love carried at her waist.

Tain sighed, broke battle discipline. "Boy, you're just too stubborn." He sheathed his swords, discarded their harness. He removed his helmet, placed it between his blades.

He went to Torfin.

The youth scarred Tain's armor twice before the soldier took the dagger and arced it out into the grass of the Zemstvi.

Torfin still would not yield.

Tain kicked his feet from beneath him, laid the edge of one hand across the side of his neck.

Tain backed away, glanced down. Torfin's dagger had found a chink. Red oozed down the shiny ebony of his breastplate. A brutalized rib began aching.

He recovered his shortsword, went toward the Witch.

In seconds she would complete her conquest of his magick. In seconds she would be able to destroy him.

Yet he hesitated.

He considered her youth, her vulnerability, her beauty, and understood how she had captivated Torfin and the Baron.

She bleated plaintively, "Mother!"

Tain whirled.

Rula stepped onto the ramparts. "Tain. Don't. Please?"

Seconds fled.

Tain sheathed his blade.

Shirl sighed and gave up consciousness.

"Tain, I brought your things. And your mule." Rula pushed past him to her daughter.

"The wound is cauterized. I'll take care of the bone."

"You're wounded. Take care of yourself."

"It can wait."

He finished Shirl's arm ten minutes later. Then he removed his breastplate and let Rula tend to his injury. It was minor. The scar would become lost among its predecessors.

Rula finished. "You'd better go. The hunter...."

"You're staying?" An infinite sadness filled him as he drew his eyes from hers to scan the Zemstvi. Kai Ling was out there somewhere. He could sense nothing, but that had no meaning. His hunter would be more cunning than he. The trap might have closed already.

"She's my daughter. She needs me."

Sadly, Tain gathered his possessions and started for the ladder.

Torfin groaned.

Tain laid his things aside, knelt beside the youth. "Ah. She does have this stubborn ass, you know." He gathered his possessions again. This time he descended without pausing.

Soldiers of the Dread Empire seldom surrendered to their emotions.

He had a hand on Steban's shoulder, trying to think of some final word, when Rula came to him. "Tain. I'll go."

He looked into her eyes. Yes, he thought. She would. Dared he?...

Sometimes a soldier did surrender. "Steban. Go find you and your mother some horses. Rula, get some things from the Tower. Food. Utensils. Clothes. Whatever you'll need. And hurry." He scanned the horizon.

Where was Kai Ling?

"Old friend, are you coming?" he whispered.

Not even the breeze responded. It giggled round the Tower as if the gathering of Death's daughters were a cosmic joke.

Their shadows scurried impatiently round the old stronghold.

They were a hundred yards along the road to nowhere.

"Tain!"

He whirled the gelding.

Torfin leaned on the battlements, right hand grasping his neck.

Then he raised the other. "Good luck, centurion."

Tain waved. He didn't reply. His ribs ached too much for shouting.

The day was dead. He set a night course for the last bit of sunlight. Rula rode to his left, Steban to his right. The mule plodded along behind, snapping at the tails of the newcomers.

He glanced back just once, to eye the destruction he had wrought. Death's daughters had descended to the feast. The corner of his mouth quirked downward.

His name was Tain, and he was still a man to beware.

XX

The wind of dark wings wakened Kai Ling. The daughters of Death circled close. One bold vulture had landed a few feet from his outstretched hand.

He moved.

The vulture took wing.

He rose slowly. Pain gnawed his nerve ends. He surveyed the stead, the smoking ruins, and understood. He had survived his mistake. He was a lucky man.

Slowly, slowly, he turned, feeling the twilight.

There. To the west. The centurion had called on the Power yet again.

"Tain, you always were more trouble than you're worth."

He remembered an incident with goldfish, when he had lied to a Tervola of the Council in order to keep Tain an eligible Aspirant. "More trouble than you're worth." Tain had resigned in favor of the legions two weeks after the prank.

Aching in every joint, the whole surface of his body stinging, Aspirant Kai Ling hiked toward the Tower.