

### **The Protectors of Zendor** by John Morressy

*Since his encounter with giants and dwarves in our February issue, Kedrigern the wizard has been keeping busy with research projects such as his study of hawks' eyesight. A good thing it is that he's rested, because his latest caper will take him and Princess into the ever-thorny world of diplomacy.*

They crested the hill and saw the towered and turreted walls of Zendor in the far distance. "We'll be there before sundown," Princess said. Kedrigern heaved a great sigh and reined in his horse. Princess halted at his side and cast a quick suspicious look in his direction.

The wizard closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. Without turning to her, he said, "I don't want to do this. I think helping Durmuk is a complete waste of time and magic."

"Never mind Durmuk. Do it for the people of Zendor," Princess said. "They're in great danger."

"The more I think about that, the less likely it seems. I don't trust Durmuk, and I don't trust his message."

In the tone one employs in dealing with a difficult child, Princess said, "It would be foolish to turn back when we're practically at the gates of Zendor. Let's go on. If we learn that he's deceived us, we'll leave."

Kedrigern emitted a wordless grumble. He did not want to go a step farther. They had spent eight days traveling here. That meant they would spend eight more returning, plus whatever time it took to find out the truth, if any, behind the summons. The possibility that all those days might be wasted made him contemplate colorful retaliation on the man who called himself Durmuk the Benign and whose benignity extended no farther than his feckless greedy self.

His message had been both blunt and vague: *Only the power of a great wizard can save the brave men of Zendor from a dreadful fate. Come to our aid, we implore you.* To any wizard unfamiliar with Durmuk and his ways, it was an appeal to honor and conscience, an inescapable moral obligation; and the promised fee was generous. But Kedrigern was acquainted with the man, and knew that it might mean no more than that someone beyond Durmuk's immediate reach was disturbing his personal comfort and convenience. If that turned out to be the case, Kedrigern promised himself, any fate involved would be a lot more dreadful than Durmuk intended.

And yet there was the possibility that Princess was right, the danger was real, and the message was in earnest. It was a remote possibility, but it existed. Even Durmuk was capable of truth in an emergency. All the same, he was a dismal specimen of a king: a spoiled and lazy glutton who concentrated on his own gratification and left Zendoran affairs in the hands of his numerous relatives. Why the people of Zendor, who liked to think of themselves as a proud and independent breed, had not sent this thoroughly worthless king and his parasitic family packing long ago, Kedrigern could not understand. Maybe they found them to their liking. If that were the case, they deserved one another and whatever befell them, and a wizard was a fool to waste his time helping them.

He was so absorbed in his sour brooding that Princess's sudden "Oh, dear me" startled him.

"What is it?" he cried in alarm. "Where?"

"There, right ahead of us."

He saw only a woman with a bundle in her arms. She was coming toward them at a headlong pace.

"You gave me a start. I thought we were being attacked."

"Perhaps we will be. That poor woman looks as though she's fleeing for her life."

Indeed, the woman came toward them like one at the end of her strength, stumbling and nearly falling as she drew near. Kedrigern dismounted and called to her. "Are you in trouble? Can we help?"

She did not respond until she had stopped at Kedrigern's side, breathless with exhaustion. She appeared to be ready to collapse at his feet. He saw the trace of blood on her cheekbone and the bruise on her forearm, but before he could speak, she shrank away and said, "Don't stop for me, sir. They'll kill us if they catch us. Kill you, too, if you help."

"Nobody's going to kill anyone. Tell me who's threatening you."

"All of them. It's always the same. They hear him," she said, glancing down at the sleeping infant in her arms, "and they want to hurt us."

"What's wrong with him?" Kedrigern asked. The baby was no more than six months old. He was pink and sleepy, and looked to be utterly harmless.

"A spell. A terrible spell. When he cries...." She hesitated and then burst into sobs.

As Kedrigern looked on, uncertain what to do next--magic does not teach one to deal with the problems of babies--Princess said, "There's a cloud of dust on the road ahead. Someone's coming."

Kedrigern drew out his medallion and peered through the Aperture of True Vision. The dust cloud resolved into a crowd heading directly toward them. No, he corrected himself, not a crowd but a mob, armed and looking determined.

"Are those people after you?" he asked the woman.

"Yes. Let me go. I can still get away. Save yourselves."

A fine welcome this is, thought the wizard with rising anger. Invited here with a false message and greeted with a bloodthirsty mob to threaten me if I help a poor frightened woman and her baby. Someone is going to be very sorry for this.

"Get on my horse," he said. "Don't say a word or make a sound."

"Oh, sir, you must not--"

"Do as I say. I'll attend to this mob."

She turned a fearful gaze on Princess, who gave her a reassuring smile. "We'll all be quite safe," she said. "You can trust my husband. He's a wizard. We're both wizards."

The woman's eyes went wide, but she mounted without a word. No sooner was she seated than Kedrigern covered his eyes and spoke a short phrase, and she disappeared. He walked on at the horse's side, holding the reins. In a short time the mob was clustering around the travelers.

"Have you seen the witch and her brat?" one of their leaders asked.

"We've seen no witch," Kedrigern replied.

"Are you sure?" another said.

"I told you so, didn't I? Who is this witch, and what has she done?"

A third man pushed himself to the fore and demanded, "You've got a horse. Why are you walking?"

"Because I don't feel like riding. Tell me, what has this witch done?"

"It's that devil's child of hers that's done it."

"We'll burn the two of them," someone in the midst of the mob shouted, and voices rose all around in enthusiastic endorsement of his words.

This sort of mob bluster was familiar to Kedrigern. He knew that the longer it was allowed to build the less good was likely to come of it, so he decided to discourage this lot quickly. "I wouldn't go any farther up this road if I were you. There's something worse than a witch lurking back there. We barely escaped it."

As his words spread among the mob, the noise level subsided. One of the leaders plucked up his courage and said, "There's nothing out there but farmland and forest."

Kedrigern shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He watched as they exchanged uneasy glances, looking to the hilltop, then back to Zendor, then at one another, as if in search of something to buttress the courage they found suddenly draining away. He said, "If your witch meets up with that thing, she'll come to a messy end. But if you want to see for yourselves...."

They wavered. Low, fearful murmuring circulated among them like a cold breeze. They were ready for the finishing touch.

From over the brow of the hill behind Kedrigern's back came a low ominous growl that grew to a snarl and then a roar, as of something large and angry and hungry. A heavy footstep shook the ground, and then another. And another, coming closer.

When the last of the mob was on its speedy way back to the shelter of Zendor's walls, Kedrigern spoke the necessary words. The roars and footfalls stopped. Mother and child came into sight on his mount. The woman's eyes were still wide in awe.

"You are a wizard," she said.

"Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain. And this lovely lady is my wife and colleague, Princess. And you're no witch, though that lot seemed to think so. Why were they so angry?"

"It's all the doing of Livia, the bog-fairy."

"A bog-fairy!" Princess said, reaching out to clasp the woman's hand in sympathy. "You poor unhappy creature, why did she do this to you?"

"She wanted my child. When I wouldn't give him up, she placed a terrible spell on him."

Her words electrified Princess. "The fiend! The absolute fiend! Keddie, we must help this woman."

"What, exactly, is the nature of the spell?" Kedrigern asked.

"Oh, it's terrible, Master, terrible."

"Bog-fairy spells generally are. Can you be more specific? Do you remember the words she used?"

Her expression grew grim. "They are burned into my memory, Master. She touched my baby with her wand, then she pointed the wand at me and said in a kind of chant,

'You, who spurn my just demand,  
Be a blight throughout the land.

All who hear your infant's cry  
Will go raving mad and die,  
Or else go blind, or lose their wits,  
Or fall into horrific fits  
And shake and shriek and moan and twitch  
And ache and squeak and groan and itch.  
Walls will fall with noise of thunder,  
Beams will split and roofs will sunder;  
Rack and ruin, pain and rue  
Will blight the landscape through and through,  
And all the blame will fall on you!

And then she gave the wand a little flick, just so. And she vanished."

"Typical bog-fairy," said Princess. The spots of color on her cheeks, the set of her jaw, and the narrowing of her eyes bespoke the upwelling of bitter memories.

Kedrigern asked the woman, "Am I correct in assuming that the spell has already manifested itself, and is the cause of that pursuit?"

"It is so, Master. I've been forced to flee my home. My sister and her husband have a little farm on this very road, and I have come to ask her to help me hide in the forest near her house until I can find some kind soul with the power to help us. I had nearly passed through Zendor without incident when my little one began to cry, and ... and.... "She hugged the child to her and began to weep.

"Just tell me what happened."

"At his first faint wail, men and women stopped as if turned to stone. Then they began to cry out in fear and pain. Children fell senseless to the ground. Some thrashed about, and others lay unmoving where they fell. All around us beams groaned, walls shook, glass shattered."

"Has this happened before?"

"It happens every time my baby cries. I strive to avoid all contact with others, but I was hungry, and I risked venturing into Zendor to purchase food. I fled, but a mob pursued."

"Aren't you affected?" Kedrigern asked.

"I hear only the wail of a hungry child."

"Fascinating," said the wizard. "That's an elegant bit of spelling. You don't see many like that these days."

"Don't applaud, do something," Princess said sharply.

"I will, my dear. But for something like this, I'll need the full resources of my library." To the woman, he said, "Will you be safe with your sister for ten days or so?"

She assured them that she would, and gave them directions to the place. From her description, they recognized a farmstead they had passed earlier that day.

"You say they have a farm. What about their livestock?"

"The spell does not affect animals. And I will live deep in the forest behind the house."

"Very well, then. Await us there. We'll bring you to our cottage."

"But Master, there's an awful creature back there. I heard its growl, and its terrible tread."

Kedrigern gave her a reassuring smile. "Only a small spell to send the mob scurrying for home. You're perfectly safe. Just wait for us, and then I'll see what I can do about a counterspell."

"That's his specialty," Princess said. "He's very good."

"Master, I'm a poor penniless woman. I can never--"

"Not a problem. This one is on Durmuk the Benign."

\* \* \* \*

They reached Zendor without further incident, and found Durmuk's second cousin, the Chamberlain, waiting at the gates with an honor guard. By that afternoon they were settled in a large, comfortably furnished suite in the palace. A fire blazed in the fireplace, the floor was strewn with fresh rushes, the bedclothes scented with lavender. Servants brought warm water for bathing, and took their traveling garments to be brushed and aired.

"A very gracious reception, don't you agree?" said Princess when the servants and attendants had left them.

"Yes."

"These are lovely chambers."

"Yes."

"Marvelous view of the royal gardens."

A nod.

"And the feast tonight is in our honor."

A grunt.

"You might show a bit more enthusiasm. This is all much better than you anticipated, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm suspicious."

"Of what?"

"Everything."

Princess closed her eyes, sighed, and changed the subject. "I hope you can finish your work here quickly. That unfortunate woman and her baby need help."

"She'll have to be patient. I can do nothing until we're home and I have a chance to consult my books."

"Nothing at all?"

"She's quite safe where she is. The local witch hunters won't set foot on that road for a good long time."

"But that poor child...."

"My dear, the child is under a bog-fairy spell. They're tricky things, as you well know, and this is a very precise one. I would not attempt to break it without thorough research. And even then, I'm not sure--"

A discreet tap at their door interrupted him. At the second tap, he opened it to find the chamberlain and three nobles waiting. With a deep bow, the chamberlain said, "My honored wizards, King Durmuk requests your attendance at an extraordinary meeting of the council."

"And when is this meeting?" Kedrigern asked.

"I am to take you there at once."

Kedrigern and Princess exchanged a quick glance. "Is Zendor under attack?"

"Not yet. An envoy from Grendoorn has come to discuss the worsening situation on the border. No doubt it is a ruse. Grendoorn is a nest of savage criminals."

"And what are we expected to do?"

"His Majesty wishes you to observe the depth of iniquity of our enemies so you may be fully persuaded of our peril."

"I see. I suppose that means dinner will be delayed," said Kedrigern.

The Chamberlain appeared shocked. "His Majesty will not permit his dinner to be ruined by the intrusion of a thieving, lying bully representing a land of sub-human renegades. Dinner will be served as planned."

"Good. I dislike lengthy meetings," said Kedrigern, gesturing for the chamberlain to lead the way. He and Princess followed arm in arm.

They were shown to places at a long table lined with somber-faced officials of Zendor, many in martial uniforms, all of them bearing a family resemblance to the king. Durmuk sat at one end, on a large throne laden with cushions. At the opposite end of the table sat the Grendoornan envoy. He appeared to be an unusually short man; his chin barely reached the tabletop. He exhibited no signs of barbarity, but on the contrary conveyed an impression of civility and courtliness.

Durmuk accorded the wizards a fulsome but brief greeting, omitting general introductions. Then, in the most contemptuous manner, he gave the envoy leave to speak.

The envoy rose, revealing himself to be not diminutive but a tall stately figure dressed in subdued gray and black, with a gold chain of office about his neck. He presented a moving appeal for peace and amity between their homelands. Grendoorn had been arming, he admitted, but only for protection: Durmuk's troops had been crossing through Plothy Pass almost daily to raid border settlements (furious denials from the uniformed men) and were massing in great numbers on the Zendoran side of the pass (general outrage; protests and shouted accusations). A large man in a spotless white uniform and crimson cloak sprang to his feet to denounce what he labeled the envoy's shameless lies. The envoy listened with admirable composure and countered by reading a list of destroyed settlements and the casualties and property losses sustained by Grendoorn in each one. His words were interrupted by mocking laughter. The laughter continued throughout his account, accompanied by shouts of "Liar!", "Shut up!" and "Sit down!" Through all these antics he comported himself with great patience and dignity.

Kedrigern looked on with growing distaste as his suspicions were fully validated. This was not a council meeting, it was a methodical humiliation, starting with the seating of the envoy on a low milking stool. It

was a deliberate provocation. Durmuk's message was a fraud.

On the other hand, envoys were not impartial and Kedrigern had not yet heard the Zendoran side of the story. All the same.... He glanced at Princess and saw from her frown and the flaring of her nostrils that she shared his distaste at the proceedings.

Before the envoy had finished, the man in the crimson cloak was on his feet again, livid with rage, shaking his fist, "No more! Your lies and distortions insult us!" he cried. "Zendor is aware of your scheme for conquest and will defend itself to the death against your aggression. Begone, traitor, and take your falsehoods with you! Go, before our righteous wrath overcomes our patience."

Kedrigern turned to the man next to him and whispered, "Who is that angry man?"

"Lord Ransidine, First First Cousin to the king and Protector of the Realm," was the reply.

The envoy bowed to Durmuk, and ignoring all the others present, strode from the chamber with head held high. When the door shut behind him, Lord Ransidine, still standing, threw back his head and laughed loudly. "So much for their lying chatter of peace and friendship. Fire and the sword is what that land of traitors deserves, and they shall have it in full measure. Grendoornan blood will flow like a mighty river."

One of the others at the table said, "It won't be easy. Grendoorn has a strong army. They will fight."

"My men will crush them," Ransidine replied.

"Not without many lost lives," another said.

Lord Ransidine brought his fist down on the table. All fell silent. "Enough of this treasonous talk!" he roared. "Grendoorn has too long been a threat to Zendor. We must conquer and subdue it, and return it to its rightful masters. Do you not agree, Your Majesty?"

Durmuk had been gazing out the window. He started, blinked, and nodded with some vigor. "Oh, yes. Conquer and subdue. Yes, I agree. We are in great danger. They're all traitors. Lord Ransidine is right. Must use force on such people."

"I have a plan. Not a drop of Zendoran blood will be shed, I promise you," said Lord Ransidine.

Murmurs of approval rose from most of those present. The two who had questioned exchanged a quick anxious glance.

Kedrigern turned to his neighbor. "The Lord Ransidine is a forceful man."

"A master tactician and brave as a lion. The kind of leader these times require," the man said with obvious satisfaction. When Kedrigern refrained from replying, he went on, "No shilly-shallying, none of your prattle of peace and friendship, just action. That's his way with traitors. Grendoorn will be ours in ten days."

"Why does he call the Grendoornans traitors?"

"Because they are. Always have been, always will be. Nothing to do but destroy them."

"I see," said Kedrigern. "Then it looks as though my journey was a waste of time."

"Waste of time? What do you mean?" said the other, turning on him with a narrow suspicious look.

Kedrigern looked about with exaggerated caution and leaning closer, said in a lowered voice, "I can only reveal that your king asked me here to save Zendor from destruction by its enemies. With a man like Lord Ransidine to protect you, I'm not needed."

"Who are you, sir?"

Kedrigern tapped his lips with a forefinger and winked once, slowly and solemnly. That, he thought, would give the fellow something to think about.

Durmuk rose abruptly, and all rose with him. Hurrying to the door, he called back, "We need not sit here all night. The chef is making Ballotine of Duckling la Chatelaine. My very favorite dish. And he's promised a special surprise for dessert. Let us away. Quickly, quickly."

The dinner that followed was rich in culinary excellence but poor in festive spirit. Durmuk's full attention was given to the food, while the talk among the other diners was of war and preparations for war. Kedrigern listened in fascinated horror as Lord Ransidine described his plans for the future of Grendoorn once the dangerous elements in its population had been annihilated. When the Lord Protector paused to catch his breath and take a sip of wine, Kedrigern asked him what offense the Grendoornans had committed to deserve such an extreme penalty.

With a long disdainful look, Ransidine said, "You are the magician summoned by His Majesty, are you not?"

"Wrong on both counts, my lord."

Lord Ransidine's hand went to his swordhilt as he rose from his place. "Then identify yourself at once!"

"I am a wizard, not a magician, and my presence is requested, not commanded."

Ransidine took a moment to absorb this information. He resumed his seat and then asked, "And this woman?"

"The lady is a princess, a wizard of considerable power, and my wife. You, I am informed, are Lord Ransidine, First First Cousin and Protector of Zendor. And now I would like an answer to my question."

Ransidine fixed a cold gaze on the wizard for a time before saying, "The offenses of the Grendoornans... I could speak until dawn, wizard, and not begin to exhaust the calendar of their crimes. Suffice it to say that they are rebels, traitors, and renegades. They present a constant danger, and must be exterminated if Zendor is to enjoy its rightful place among the nations. Your mission, wizard, is to protect the lives of the brave Zendorans who go off to war in defense of the kingdom. You must use your power to see that not one falls."

"I'm always pleased to save brave men from death."

"Then do your duty. You will be well paid," said Ransidine, and turned away; but not before taking a long admiring look at Princess.

I just bet I'll be paid, Kedrigern thought. The aura of knavery hung about Lord Ransidine as unmistakably as his crimson cloak.

\* \* \* \*

When he mentioned his feelings to Princess later that night, her reaction surprised him. "He doesn't seem treacherous. He's a loud nasty bully, yes, but not treacherous," she said.



"He's treacherous. I can tell. And I don't like the way he was leering at you."

"He wasn't leering, just ogling."

"I know leering when I see it. This is a very bad situation, my dear. We were summoned here on the pretext that Zendor was in danger. The fact is that Ransidine and his friends are determined to start a war with Grendoorn. You saw how they tried to provoke the envoy. Durmuk is perfectly willing to let them do it so long as it doesn't interfere with his meals. Ransidine expects me to use my magic to make certain that no Zendoran troops are lost. They want me to arrange a massacre! And for no reason!"

"Don't get excited. There must be a reason," she said. "Maybe the Grendoornans outnumber the Zendorans."

"They don't."

"Then they must have a terrible secret weapon."

"They haven't."

"Perhaps a powerful wizard. Several powerful wizards."

"My dear, we would have sensed the presence of other wizards long before this. No, Lord Ransidine and his friends are hungry for a war, and they want me here to make sure they have it at no cost to Zendor. Not even my fee, I bet."

"You just don't like blustering bullies who enjoy starting wars."

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"Of course not. But how can you be certain that's what they're really up to?"

Kedrigern dropped onto the bed beside her, folded his arms, and scowled. "I can't. That's what bothers me. I feel it. I'm sure of it. Everything points to it. But I don't know."

"And what about that poor woman and her child?"

He groaned. "I don't know what to do about her, either. You remember how much trouble we had with the bog-fairy spell on you. It took us years to rid you of that thing."

"This one might not be as bad."

"They're all bad."

"Well, try to get a good night's sleep. I'm sure you'll think of something."

Princess turned on her side and went directly to sleep. Kedrigern would have preferred to vent for an hour or so, but that required an audience. He was sure he would not sleep well, and he was right.

\* \* \* \*

He spent much of the next morning pacing about the palace and the grounds, eyes downcast, trying to concentrate while all around him Zendor made ready for war. Everywhere in the castle and its environs, the clamor of preparation clanked and rattled and thumped and thundered and roared.

He was in a quandary. It would not be right for him to protect the men of Zendor in order that they might butcher their neighbors with impunity; neither would it be right for him to let lives be spilled that he might

otherwise have saved. The ideal solution was to stop the war entirely, but with men like Lord Ransidine and his faction determined to reduce Grendoorn to dust and ashes, that might require drastic steps. And on the chance that there were those in Grendoorn who felt as Ransidine did, rash action might only waste time and magic and leave things worse than before. What he needed was a way to make war unthinkable for either side. And if a spell for that purpose existed, it had been kept very secret.

Granted the frailties of human nature and the evidence of history, a permanent peace was unlikely; but if he could find a way to keep matters quiet for a few years, cooler heads might prevail. If they did not seem to be doing so, he could help things along at the proper moment.

He had a strong urge to wash his hands of this sorry business and return home. At the thought, he realized that once home he would have to face the problem of undoing a bog-fairy's spell, and an obviously well-planned one at that, likely to be swathed in all manner of snares for the unwary disenchanter.

His aimless wandering took him through courts and corridors to a dusty passage in the farthest tower, remote from the tumult and the shouting. Here he was surprised by the sudden appearance of a very old man who popped from a doorway to hail him with a joyous cry. "At last! A messenger from my Lord Ransidine! You bear good news, I trust."

The old man's face was the color of buttermilk. The lower half was hidden by an ashen beard that hung almost to his knees. His sunken eyes were bright with what appeared to be genuine delight. Kedrigern had no idea who the old fellow was--probably some mad but harmless royal relation--but he had no aura of magic or menace about him, and seemed so pleased by the sight of another that it seemed a pity to disappoint him.

"Alas, I am no messenger, sir, merely a visitor to Zendor," the wizard said.

The old man's pleasure was undampened. "The more welcome, then. Come in, come in."

Kedrigern followed him into a large chamber lined with shelves on which were heaped in no discernible order books and scrolls and bundles of documents. It was an inviting retreat, recalling the comfortable untidiness of his own workroom.

"Few visit this chamber," the man confided. "You are the second in forty-seven years. Only Lord Ransidine shows any interest in our history."

That was a surprise. "Indeed? He does not impress me as a man given to scholarly pursuits."

"You know the great lord, then?"

"We have dined together, and discussed affairs of state."

"A friend of the Lord Protector is doubly welcome," said the old fellow, clasping Kedrigern's hand in a bony grip. "Lord Ransidine is a true patriot. A man of action. He will reunite the kingdom. I may yet see the dream of generations fulfilled! Zendor made one again! Brothers reconciled! Families rejoined! Be seated, friend, and let us talk."

Kedrigern passed an informative morning with the old man, who was the Historiographer Royal of Zendor, an office he had held for nearly sixty years. He was bursting to talk about his work, and Kedrigern was a willing listener.

The history consisted largely of heroic legend and myth, fleshed out with wishes, guesses, fantasies, and dreams of glory. With the aid of dusty books and ancient maps, he informed the wizard of the Great

Severing, when the ancient kingdom of Zendor was divided between the twin sons of the mythical hero King Epizeuxis and his queen, the goddess Anadiplosis. The bold warrior son Blustror retained the ancient name of Zendor for this part of the sundered kingdom, while his sly and treacherous brother Grendoom took the rich portion beyond the mountains, named it for himself, and proceeded to brew dastardly plots against his noble brother, establishing a pattern of behavior that persisted through succeeding generations. So, at least, went the official history according to Zendor.

"All this was forgotten for many years. But with my loyal assistance Lord Ransidine has unearthed the truth. Now we know the cause of all our troubles." A dramatic pause, and the old man cried, "Grendoom!"

"Indeed?"

"Beyond all doubt." Rubbing his palms together, twitching with eagerness, the Historiographer went on, "But we know the cure, as well. Lord Ransidine will purge the disloyal elements, reunite the kingdom, and restore Zendor's honor and our glory."

"I see. Have the Grendoomans attacked frequently over the years?"

The old man gave a wild cackle of mocking laughter. "They never attack openly. They do not dare. They pretend to be peace-loving, and speak of our neighborly bond while they weave their stealthy schemes. But Lord Ransidine sees through their faade."

"I bet he does," said Kedrigern.

"When he is king, the world will tremble at the name of Zendor."

"And when will that be?"

"Soon, soon. The stars predict it. At the news of the great victory over Grendoom, King Durmuk will expire in joy. All Zendor will mourn his tragic loss, but it is destined to be. And the Lord Protector will ascend the throne."

Kedrigern sighed and shook his head. There was the root of the matter, plain as a plum on a white platter. Durmuk was an only child, unmarried. As First First Cousin, Ransidine need only wait to succeed him. Poor silly Durmuk probably thought his Lord Protector was content to do so, entertaining himself in the interim by playing at war. But Ransidine, it appeared, was not a patient man, even for a sure thing.

The reasons for the war were clear now: pride, vanity, and ambition, the mix generously spiced with hunger for power. A conquering hero, uniter of the ancient kingdom, would simply sweep aside the effete and useless Durmuk. The picture was not pretty, but at least it was no longer a puzzle.

Kedrigern thanked the old man and took his leave. More than ever he needed to think. All very well to have the problem plainly before him, but the solution would be a matter of some delicacy.

His walking brought him to the courtyard, where preparations for the coming onslaught were in full swing. The din was dreadful. Pikemen were stomping and clattering about to the bellowed commands of their sergeants. The heavy tread of their marching thundered in these narrow confines. Drums were beating somewhere, and trumpets blating loudly and discordantly. Wagons rumbled back and forth to no discernible purpose, menacing all in their path. Large unseen objects crashed and rumbled and thudded amid shouts of rage and frustration.

A rackety business, war, even in its preparatory stages, Kedrigern thought. Here in the courtyard, sounds were magnified to a deafening degree. They echoed back and forth, affording no respite from the din,

making it impossible to concentrate. It seemed that the walls would come tumbling down from the sheer volume of sound thundering about within them. Covering his ears, he retreated into the castle.

As he walked down a narrow passage, his ears still ringing, he marveled that men could do battle in such an uproar. He stopped abruptly in his tracks and thought for a moment, then he laughed softly to himself. He clapped his hands together and laughed aloud. He had the solution.

\* \* \* \*

"Remember, now, just enough of a spell to put him into a sound sleep. We don't want him snoring away for the next six months," he said to Princess.

"I know exactly what to do."

"And put a protective spell on yourself as soon as you leave this room. No, put it on now. Right now. And extend it over them when you bring them back."

"I think you overestimate the danger."

"Better overestimate than underestimate. Maybe it would be best if you make yourself invisible."

"Oh, really, Keddie."

"I'm very concerned, my dear. I'd like to send an armed escort with you, but I can't trust anyone here. You must take every precaution."

"I will. I promise. Invisibility and a protection spell. Anything else?"

"Speed. Bring them back as quickly as you can. I'll speak with Durmuk and let him know what's to be done."

Princess placed a hand on the doorknob and promptly vanished. Unseen lips brushed his cheek, an unseen voice bade him farewell, and then the door opened and closed.

It took Kedrigern some time to locate the king. Durmuk had felt a sudden urge for scrumbleberry pie, and had gone in person, with a small escort, to his favorite pastry chef in town to order a batch baked at once. Kedrigern found him at the shop, nibbling impatiently at a raisin cookie. Several dozen more cookies lay before him.

"What brings you here, Master Kedrigern? Are wizards fond of scrumbleberry pie?" the king asked.

"I bring good news, Majesty. No one need die. There will be no war."

"How very nice of you!" Durmuk exclaimed with a happy grin. "I don't really want a war at all, but Ransidine and his friends keep insisting that we're in danger, and so...." His expression turned thoughtful. "My cousin will be disappointed. He had his heart set on a brief glorious conquest."

"Perhaps Lord Ransidine will pursue other interests. Say, the study of history."

The king gave a hearty laugh. "You're a droll fellow, Kedrigern. Fancy Ransidine studying history. He's never read a book in his life. Nor have I. Our family were never much for such things."

It seemed the proper time for Durmuk to be made aware of his cousin's new interest in Zendoran history and his plans for the kingdom's future. As Kedrigern was concluding his account to the increasingly astonished and incredulous monarch, Lord Ransidine burst into the shop with a squad of his personal guards at his back.

Ignoring the wizard, he said, "You must return to the castle at once, Your Majesty. It is not safe for you to go abroad in such perilous times."

Durmuk lightly waved off the admonition. "No fear, cousin. Master Kedrigern has seen to everything. There'll be no war."

"No war? What do you mean, no war?!" Lord Ransidine cried. His face grew very red.

"He'll explain it to you. I must say, I'm relieved. We can stop this infernal racket, and rushing about, and fuss, and dust, and shouting, while I'm trying to enjoy a decent meal. You can learn to study history."

Ransidine gaped at his cousin in confusion, but only for an instant. Recovering, he drew his sword, roared, "The king is a traitor! Betrayal! Treachery! Seize them!" He brought the sword high for a deadly slash at Durmuk. Kedrigern dove for the king to push him aside, and Ransidine's descending blade caught him a glancing blow on the shoulder. He went down, but even as he scrambled to his feet he was able to work a quick transformation. Lord Ransidine and his men vanished from sight.

"Sorry to be rough, Your Majesty," he said, hauling the astonished Durmuk to his feet while the king's guards poured into the shop and milled about in confusion.

"He tried.... He would have.... Oh, my," said Durmuk in a faint voice. "You.... You're hurt. Here, quick, have a cookie. Sit down. Guard, summon the royal physician. Quickly, quickly! Bring me some pie! Oh, my."

When Durmuk had calmed down, and a table had been spread at which he could revive himself with generous slices of pie, and the wizard's shoulder was being bound with fine linen bandages tied in place by the royal physician under Durmuk's close watch, Kedrigern outlined his peace plan.

"All that's required is a house with a clear view of Plothy Pass for a certain woman and her child. House and outbuildings must be very strongly built. Strong as fortresses. I'll give you the specifications."

"Will this woman defend them all by herself?" Durmuk asked between bites of pie.

"Entirely alone, your Majesty. She is an unfailing peacekeeper."

"Amazing. Astonishing. Do have a piece of pie."

"Thank you. She and her child must live there entirely undisturbed. Necessary supplies are to be deposited at a designated spot, and absolutely no one is to approach the house under any circumstances. No human contact until we notify you. As long as these conditions are met, no aggressor will ever cross the border. I give you my word on that," he said.

"She must be a very powerful wizard."

"She has great power. She's a devoted mother, as well."

Durmuk blinked in wonderment. "How very nice. And she asks no reward?"

"The house, the necessities of life, and privacy. Absolute privacy. Nothing more. But I would suggest a generous stipend as evidence of Your Majesty's good will and magnanimity."

"Yes, of course. A stipend. Amazing. Brilliant. And so simple. Well done, wizard. It's such a relief not to have to go to war."

"Lord Ransidine didn't seem so relieved."

"Oh, him. My cousin is a very brave man, but he's so restless. And always angry. Always shouting at someone. Where is he, by the way? He seems to have disappeared. I suppose I ought to do something about his attack on me."

"I already have. I turned him and his men into mice."

"Mice? Oh, my." Durmuk giggled.

"It's only a temporary spell. He'll come around in three or four months. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no, I don't mind at all." Durmuk paused, a slab of pie halfway to his mouth, and giggled once again. "Mice. It might improve his temper. Perhaps I won't have to hang him after all."

Kedrigern's eyes were on Colette, the baker's cat, snow-white and plump as a dumpling. She had entered silently and composed herself before a small hole in the wainscoting, upon which her gaze was intently fixed.

He smiled. Durmuk had echoed his thoughts. Learning how it feels to be small and helpless and frightened might do wonders for Lord Ransidine's character.

\* \* \* \*

Workmen were dispatched to Plothy Pass that very day. When Princess returned the following morning and saw Kedrigern's bandages, she flew to his side and quite overwhelmed him with solicitude and caresses and anxious questions. He insisted that his injury was minor and that they had far more important matters to concern them. Once assured, she asked, "What happened to your protective spell? Don't tell me you went out without a protective spell after warning me. Oh, Keddie, how could you be so careless?"

"One hardly thinks a protective spell necessary in a pastry shop, my dear."

"If I recall correctly, you told me that it was better to overestimate the danger than underestimate it. But to ignore it completely...." She threw up her hands.

"Things worked out for the best. I assume your excursion went well. You certainly made excellent time."

She accepted the obvious change of subject graciously. "It was fortunate I had a protective spell on. The baby gave a little whimper, and a tree very nearly fell on me. The previous day he had had a touch of colic. Trees were splintered and boulders shattered for quite a distance around. He's under a sleeping spell now."

"I never realized that I was sending you into peril."

"And I never expected to return and find you wounded," she said, slipping her arms around his waist and laying her head on his uninjured shoulder.

"Fortunately, we're both safe."

"But you must be more cautious in future."

They clung together in silence for a time, and then Kedrigern asked, "Where are our clients, by the way? Are they safe?"

"They're outside the door. Don't worry--they're still invisible."

"I've found a temporary solution. They'll be lonely, but they'll be safe and well provided for while I seek

out the proper counterspell."

She looked up at him. "You won't need it."

"Won't I?"

"While I was riding, I had time to think about the curse on that poor child. I don't think you need worry about despending him."

"I needn't?"

She shook her head. "Livia overlooked something."

She explained her reasoning. It took Kedrigern no more than an instant to see the logic of her solution. He hugged her as best he could with one shoulder swathed in bandages.

Princess went to the door and beckoned the woman and her son inside, where she at once made them visible. "What must I do, Master Kedrigern?" the mother asked. "Are we safe now? How long will they let me stay here?"

"I'm arranging for temporary lodgings on the outskirts of Zendor, well out of earshot of any neighbors. You'll remain there until your house in Ploth Pass is ready. After that it's all in your hands."

"My house? Am I to have a house?"

"A house and grounds of your very own, and all you need to live in it comfortably. Gifts of King Durmuk."

She looked from one to the other in astonishment. "Why is he so generous to me? What must I do?"

"Your duty is very simple. You must keep the peace. If anyone enters the pass from either kingdom, you must pinch the baby until he cries. Zendor and Grendoom depend on you," Kedrigern said.

She hugged the child to her. "Poor little thing. I hope he understands."

"You must not fail. A pinch on that baby's bottom will save hundreds of lives."

"I will be faithful. I'm so grateful to you both. We'll have a little house where we can live out our lives, harming no one. It will be lonely in the years to come, but my little boy will be safe."

"You needn't worry about the future. By the time your boy is walking you can have all the visitors you please. You might even open an inn, or a little shop. Your son will be able to play with other children and make all the noise he wants to without harming anyone," Kedrigern assured her. "By that time, any warlike spirit should have cooled. If not, you need only get word to us."

"But what about the spell?"

Kedrigern nodded to Princess. "My wife will explain."

Princess took the astonished woman by the hand. "Bog-fairy spells are very precise. Livia's wording placed it on the infant. So once your son is no longer an infant--a matter of a year or two--the spell will simply fade away."

"A year or two...." The woman's face lit up. She shook her head in happy bewilderment. "But how can this be? Livia wanted to cause us both a lifetime of suffering."

"Like all bog-fairies, Livia focused her attention on laying springes and traps and pitfalls for anyone who might dare to tamper with her spells. She was mean," Princess said, "and her meanness made her careless. If she had simply said 'child's voice' instead of 'infant's cry,' the spell would have posed a challenge. But at the time her nasty mind was concerned only with the infant you so bravely denied her."

"It's hard to imagine a bog-fairy being so careless," said the woman.

"Everyone's careless at one time or another," Princess said. She shot a quick glance at Kedrigern. "Even wizards."