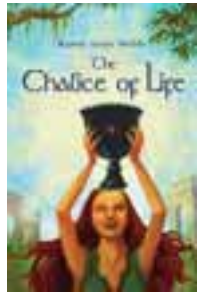


ADVENTURERS OF THE CAROTIAN UNION



BOOK 1

THE CHALICE OF LIFE

KAREN ANNE WELLS

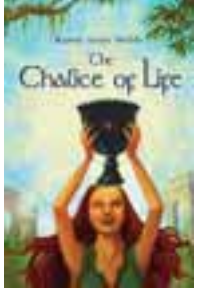
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Adventurers of the Carotian Union: The Chalice of Life

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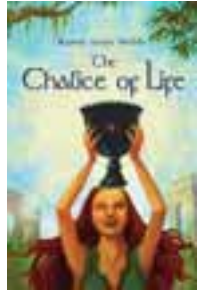
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FOR my heroes:

FOR J.R.R. Tolkien, who taught me that the greatness of
a book lies not in the cleverness of its plot
but in its ability to inspire the noblest sentiments
of the human heart

FOR C.S. Lewis, who taught me that gateways to unnumbered
realms lie in one's own back yard and that religious allegory
and a moral center can be not a book's weakness but its
greatest strength

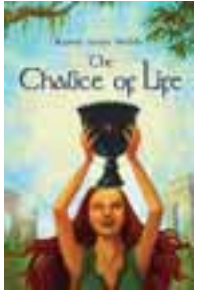
FOR Doug Adams, who taught me that the best way to
travel is to hitchhike through the fertile fields of
one's own imagination



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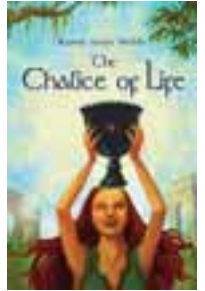


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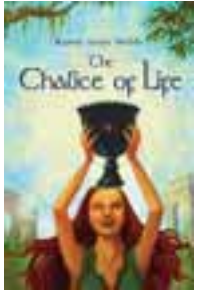
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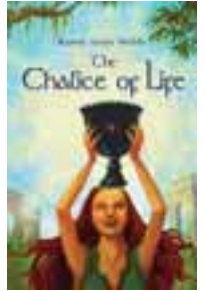


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PROLOGUE



Sage and Chronicler



7

“Heroes,” mused the Sage. “What’s happened to all the heroes? And where in the name of Ereb are they when you need them?” He took a long drag on his pipe, then leaned his chin on his staff and went back to staring into the fire.

Not wanting to rush him, the Chronicler waited patiently. However, as the silence dragged out the space of many heartbeats, she began to wonder if he had forgotten her. Had he wandered into that realm where dream meets memory and so become ensnared? Or had he merely fallen asleep? “That remark is not one I would ever have expected to hear escape your lips,” she prompted at last. “Master,” she added, as if the concept of master and pupil went beyond her ken.

But when the Sage lifted his eyes from the flames, his glance looked as keen and focused as ever. He regarded her for a long moment: an observer might have thought he was trying to peer into her heart, her soul, into the corners of her being for which she had no name. Then, with sudden good humor, he spoke. “For your people,” he commented, “the mindscape exists as a waking reality: an effect, I think, of your ability to don and shed a physical form as need dictates. For those like Tuhl mired in a physical body—” Here he thumped his small chest. “—the paths of the mindscape constitute a twisty maze. You must forgive an old fool for getting lost in them! It was not aimless rambling but a sincere attempt to guide your footsteps.”

She smiled kindly. “I think you have only ever intended me good. You

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do not need to apologize for the way you go about achieving it.” *And you are about as much a fool as I am a Lemurian*, she thought.

“I do not need to *apologize*,” he chuckled, “but perhaps I do need to explain. I was following the trail of my own memories back to the beginning. What you cannot glean from speaking with the questors themselves or from watching their story unfold in the Flames, I must try to make clear for you myself so you can write this great chronicle—and already I’ve muddled your thoughts by doing no more than thinking aloud! That remark was neither curse to hurl at the gods from Tuhl’s own lips nor idle musing. Tuhl was quoting, quoting someone you already know and will come to know better hereafter. Those were the words of Mistra herself.”

“Mistra!” the Chronicler gasped. Hastily, she flipped back through the reams of notes she had scribbled. “But I have heard from your own lips that of all the servants of the One in Creation, she was the most loyal, the most true, the most—” She shrugged in a show of helplessness and offered up the thick wad of notes as evidence. “By every god in the Pantheon, when we struggled our sorry way back to peace and faith on Thalas, it was she even more than the King who set us our example! Was it not the gods themselves who took her and set her above all others to—?”

Tuhl slapped a finger to his lips to quiet her, then touched it to the side of his nose and winked. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, young Peri. You will only confuse your history if you insist on calling the adventurers King this or Princess that. Their given names will do.” He sighed. “The gods know each of those fine people did his own name great honor by taking up the burden of that quest of quests when the Call came, and greater honor yet by staying true to their collective purpose. And none rose higher in the test than Mistra of Caros.”

He puffed a moment, framing his thoughts before he went on. “Mistra is, to my mind, the brightest star in the firmament of the Royal House of Caros—strong she is and skilled, brilliant and brave. When her patroness, Minissa, marked her for the quest, Mistra submitted with as much grace as any I have ever seen or heard tell of—no crying, no screaming, no shouted recriminations. I did not misspeak: she is devoted to Minissa and the rest, as devoted as if the whole lot of them were her family rather than her gods. But devotion has consequences, and even our best-loved gods make demands of their most devoted servants. Because devotion demanded she acquiesce to those demands, she was quiet and pale and withdrawn when she arrived here, and her heart was broken nearly in two. In the end, it was the waiting that did her in.” He shook his head. “Still, that one outburst about heroes was all I ever heard on the subject. Angry it was, but not without reason.”

He shifted his gaze into the middle distance; his eyes took on the bright yet hazy focus of the diviner watching a scene obscured from all eyes but his own unfolding across an expanse of time and space. “As a light Mistra was to her companions, a fire blazing on a mountaintop in the blackest night. And there was light waiting for her at the end of the tunnel she entered on that day so long ago—light so magnificent it would have blinded a lesser soul. But that tunnel had so many twists to it that she

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herself remained in darkness till she had come nearly through to the other side. On the day she came to me and I understood all that had been asked of her, all that she had willingly sacrificed, even *I* wept. I searched in it all for the wisdom of Caros or the justice of Ereb or the compassion of sweet Arayne." He let out a ragged breath. "But my search proved vain." He shook his head again and poked at the fire with his staff.

Peri had remained absorbed by his discourse, but now she pouted a little. "Hmph. None of my people was even chosen for this quest, though every other race in the Union was represented. Goddess bless! Complete *outworlders* were chosen! We would not have been so easily grieved had one of us been selected."

Tuhl smiled sympathetically, but there was the memory of pain about his eyes. "Oh, I think Minissa knew exactly what she was doing when she chose them for *that* task and you for *this*. The questors were sprinters, however difficult and dangerous the course they ran. Your course will be longer—less difficult, maybe, but one whose end only those who possess the attribute of endurance will see. And you *will* endure. You will labor even as Tuhl does; this Chronicle will be only the beginning. Your station, like Tuhl's, will be that of the hero who remains ever in the background yet performs deeds as valorous as those of the bravest knight. A mysterious figure you will be, like Tuhl; many will regard you as no more than legend, and most will discount you as no better than myth: they are of the foolish. But your business, like Tuhl's, will be with those who thirst after knowledge, and they will come to fill your days and nights soon enough." The old bearded lips parted in a serene smile. "The Pantheon, and beyond them the One whom they serve, have ordained in their wisdom a place in Creation for both the sprinters and the distance runners."

She nodded, satisfied. When she returned to her notes, though, her brow puckered into a small frown. "Waiting?" she muttered, then addressed Tuhl. "You said it was the waiting that did her in?"

"Hmmm?"

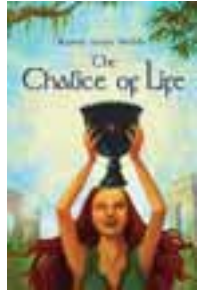
"What waiting?"

He chuckled. "Ah, yes, I understand the bards are already hard at work making mincemeat of the quest's details. I can hear them now, casting it all into verse and saying that blessed Minissa struck the ground with her Rod of Plenty—" Here he gave the ground near the fire circle a good, solid whack with his staff. "—and up popped all seven questors, provisioned and in full battle array, all ready to launch themselves through the first Portal the instant she gave the word." He underscored his verbal irony with a histrionic flourish.

"Well," Peri asked in a small voice, "isn't that true -er- in essence, if not in substance?"

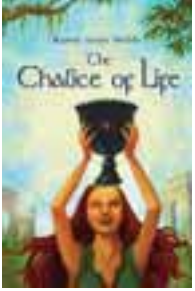
He cocked an eyebrow at her as if he would either snap her head off for the stupidity of the remark or ask if the minds of her folk were as flimsy as their natural form.

"I mean," she stumbled on, "even if Minissa *did* search them out from among the living rather than creating them from scratch, isn't the point that she got them here, and they entered the first Portal as one?"



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The Chalice of Life



He kept the eyebrow cocked a moment longer, then relented: it may have been the way she looked so desperate to melt back into the Ether to avoid his glance. “Mistra was chosen long before the others,” he finally said. “She had to be! There were so many intricacies to unlocking the power of the one artifact potent enough to free the King, the artifact she bore alone for all those months, and she had to learn them all! She always was a quick study, but this one time her talent played her false. She was left with many empty hours to fill before the others began to arrive. A good month it was until all of them gathered here. Some came from far away.” He chortled. “And some, it turned out, had been lurking unknown under our very noses for years...”

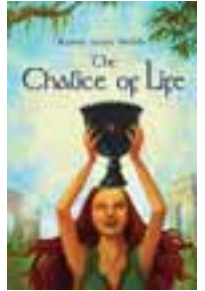
He reached into the small urn at his feet and drew out a pinch of grey dust. “Watch!” he commanded as he cast it into the fire. The flames blazed up as if they would blot out the night sky above them, then burst into a shower of sparks that descended back to earth like a veil of red and silver lace.

And from that lacework, images began to form...

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CHAPTER 1



The Call



11

“What is abhorrent to you, do not to your neighbor.
This is the Ethic; all the rest is commentary.”
—Stephan of Caros

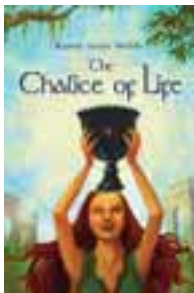
In a marketplace in the Carotian capital, a diminutive figure lounged against a wall. She was doing her best to blend into her surroundings and escape notice, and she was, on the whole, succeeding. Like Tuhl, she was a Lemurian. Unlike Tuhl, she had not undergone the Sleep of Transformation that set the old sage apart. In this, she was not alone. When the Lemurians had learned of Tuhl’s existence 20 years ago, the news had swept the Lemurian colony like a violent tide. A Lemurian who had undergone the Transformation still lived? Incredible! However, even with Tuhl as a living example that the change could still take place, the Lemurian who chose that path when he came of an age to do so was rare indeed.

Her fur was tawny, touched with rose and striped with pastel green. Green feathered away as the stripes crossed her breast and throat; her face was a sea of unbroken tan. Her eyes were that variety of hazel whose color shifts, in her case to bright emerald when she was angry and to a brown mottled with green and gold sparks when she was truly pleased. This interplay of colors brought to her coat and eyes the hue of dappled sunlight on a forest floor. No true child of Minissa—or of any of the other deities involved with art or nature—could have looked upon that woodland palette

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and not had his breath stolen away.

She hated it. It was her bane, her curse, the source of her misery. Those markings the Carotians would have found so exquisite formed no distinct pattern: there were no whorls, no branchings, no true shaping of light by dark. Her coat announced to any who gave her so much as a perfunctory glance that she was a foundling and that no family had ever claimed her.

Her name was Habadiah. She hated that, too. As distinctive markings would have come from clan recognition, so would a host of names: patronymics, metronymics, honorifics, addenda without end that would tell the world she had come of age and that her forebears were Lemurians of quality. The community of the People of Lemur had looked out for her, after a fashion. Through the years, clan after clan had taken her in for a time, given her food and shelter (she would have said kitchen scraps and unheated garret rooms), and put her to work as the least of servants. That she could read and do sums at all she owed to an agile mind and a spirit that refused to be quenched no matter the icy sea of antipathy in which it was constantly immersed.

And to one thing more: her fingers were more nimble than any others in the colony. She had been forced to purloin that first grammar, that first book of numbers, and that with a degree of trepidation. *Stealing is wrong* had been drilled into her head by every family that had ever taken her in: most said it as though they believed robbing them blind became the thought foremost in her mind the instant she arrived on their doorstep. And one day, something in her simply snapped at the presumption. *Stealing may be wrong*, a little voice inside her head rebutted, *but virtually enslaving defenseless little kids is worse*. She also thought, *You expect that you need to nail your valuables down as long as I'm under your roof? Fine! Let's give the people what they want*. With those statements made only in the silence of her own heart, she embraced her newly-discovered aptness of hand. Entire new vistas opened up to her. There was nourishing food to be had, and warm clothing, and after them gold and jewels.

In all of the years Habadiah had been plying her trade, she had been caught only once, and that at an age where it was written off as the adolescent prank of a poor relation. At least, the local magistrate had seen it that way. Her family-of-the-moment had taken a more dim view: they had beaten her and sent her packing. The incident, rather than discouraging her, had taught her finesse. After that, she was rarely suspected, never caught in the act, and never found with damning evidence in her possession.

With success had come a little pride. She shortened her name to Habie as a symbol of liberty. Habadiah had been a slave in all but name; Habie, clan-bound or not, was free. Habadiah had had the luck of the draw go against her at conception; Habie drew her luck from the very Ether and shaped it to suit her needs. Habadiah with her indistinct coloring might as well have hung a sign around her neck that said, "Orphaned Bastard Child Up For Grabs—Exploit Me!" Habie with her sense of presence just might be

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able to pass her coloring off as that of a clan-bound youth, mature in form but still too young for anyone to expect her clan-pattern to be well defined.

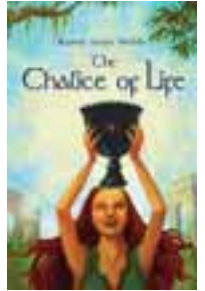
Until today, she had limited her excursions, stealing only when she could justify the theft, taking only what she could use immediately or share with a friend in need: she was not the only Lemurian left orphaned and homeless by the war with Thalás. However, when she had come of age a week ago, the clans had formally disowned her. It was their right according to the law: since she had no proven kinship ties and no family had ever offered to adopt her, the colony was only obliged to provide her safe harbor till her eighteenth birthday. She had no place to go, and without the formal protection of a family, she was fair game for anyone—Lemurian, Carotian, Tigroid or outworlder—whose only reason for not lashing out lay in fear of vendetta.

No worries, she said to herself. One quick strike at any of these merchants—at these overfed, overcompensated, under-worked mountains of draffing drek, she corrected herself—and I'll be set for life. One quick strike, and I can ditch the Lemurian quarter completely. I could find work at the palace, maybe leave Caros completely! Not much guild action around here, but I've heard great things about the thieves' and assassins' guilds on Thalás, and that sort of protection would draw rings around anything the clans could dish up.

She shook off the laziness that came with daydreaming in the warmth of the suns at their zenith. She had been hanging around the market all morning observing. She had her victim marked already—a seller of fine cloths at the tent-like stall across the lane. Soon...

She looked up as a trumpeted fanfare sounded. A royal party was approaching, and from a direction that would draw folk away from the stall she intended to burgle. The party was on foot rather than mounted, and that was odd enough in itself, but the standards the guards carried were not those of the Carotian court. Patrons who had been leaving the stalls in ones and twos now came pouring out like a herd of sheep being driven to market. Habie could not understand why the party was commanding so much attention. The entire court parading through town mounted and decked out in their brightest festival garb had not caused this much excitement the one time she had seen it. *Well, she thought, who cares what they're all rushing to see as long as the spectacle holds their attention? If the whole barmy lot of them cause a human logjam the city watch can't penetrate if this guy does raise the alarm, so much the better.*

An onlooker would have seen those green and gold sparks set her eyes aflame as the merchant himself emerged to see what the commotion was all about. "Better and better," she murmured when he continued a few paces up the lane. In less than three of her own heartbeats, the expression on his face went from one of curiosity to one of recognition to one of absorption so complete she thought he would not notice if she set a pronucleonic grenade on his head and pulled the pin. Not one to miss an opportunity, Habie skittered across the lane to the stall and slipped around to the back. With a quick nod to whatever god looked out for thieves and a promise to tithe if ever she found a place to do him worship, she drew her dagger,



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made a slit in the canvas just wide enough for her to enter, and crawled inside.

She stayed low till she made certain the shop was completely vacant. The proprietor might not have stepped out had there still been customers inside, but why take chances? A quick survey, and a broad grin crossed her face: the place was empty. And there, fully visible from the spot where she crouched, sat the object of her excursion—the small strongbox that held the loot. She stole over to it and tried the catch. It held fast. At least the proprietor had had the sense to lock his cash box before he had stepped out. Out came the tools of her trade, and—snick, click—up popped the lid.

Just as the lock opened, she heard voices outside. First came the proprietor's, and he was addressing at least one "your majesty." It sounded as if this royal party from wherever-it-was had come to market specifically to see the very bolts of fabric that rose to the ceiling all around her. *Oh, swell*, she thought. *Just draffing incredible. I burgle the best dry goods shop in the market the same day some idiot noblewoman decides she needs a new ball gown!* Habie's common sense told her to forget about the robbery and get moving. But a second sense—avarice—flared at the sight of the small mountain of gold cached in the box, and she could not easily let the opportunity go. Moving quickly as panic started to mount, she collected most of it in the leather pouch she had brought along, then jammed the pouch down the front of her shirt, slammed down the lid of the cash box, and dived behind the nearest display counter. A heartbeat later, the tent flap opened.

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In walked the proprietor and his guests. Habie held her breath, then peered out when no footsteps came toward her. *Whew!* No one had spotted her. The entire group remained near the entrance, most of them milling around in a loose knot. If she kept her head, she could escape before anyone noticed the gold was missing. She backed toward the slit she had made, not daring to look behind her for fear of losing sight of a single one of the intruders. Identifying them or their exact number had not crossed her mind when she had first glanced in their direction, but now she saw that the entire party was human, although only about half looked like they were from Caros. All were armed; the guards were simply more heavily armed than the rest. Her nose would have barely come to the waist of some of the men. Unlike the bulky proprietor, the newcomers boasted contours that suggested they would stand a fair chance of winning a fight against twice their number had they cast their blades onto the nearest midden heap. She would have taken her chances against a like number of Lemurians, but this was definitely not a crowd she wanted to tangle with! *Well*, she thought, *two more heartbeats and it won't be an issue*. She felt her heel knock against the wooden support she had sighted as her landmark and slid her toe back to feel for the slit.

It was gone.

Considering that this might be a manifestation of panic or that she had simply misjudged the distance—but discounting both possibilities—she turned her head to look.

Nothing.

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She looked some more, certain that she was in the right place, but, try as she might, she could not find the opening she had made. She cringed as she heard the proprietor pop open the lid of his strongbox—and bellow out that he had been robbed. There were too many people in here for her to hide from all of them for long; even the tiny sound her dagger would make if she slit the canvas again would have the guards on her in an instant. She would just have to make a dash for it!

Still keeping low, she positioned herself so she had a clear shot at the tent flap. She tensed. She cast a dirty look heavenward as if to tell her theoretical god of thieves that this was his fault and that she would be keeping her tithes to herself, thank you very much. Then she sprang forward.

Time seemed to halt around her; shapes faded to a soft blur. People—*big* people—screamed and grabbed, and she heard swords being drawn, but the sounds seemed to come from a great distance. One thing only remained in focus: the tent flap. Three meters, and she would be through.

Two meters...

One...

She had dodged every other person who stood between her and freedom, but with bare millimeters to go, a tall nobleman stepped into the gap between her and the tent flap. The fact that he was not Carotian barely registered as she was lifted cleanly off her feet by two burly guards. They held her so she was forced to meet his eyes. She felt her look of earnest defiance crumble away till there was nothing left but bewilderment, for the nobleman wore the last expression she had ever expected to see on the face of a captor—an amused smile.

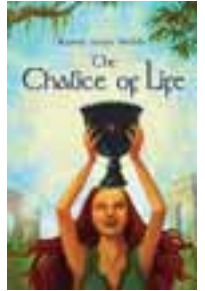
“Well, Allred,” the nobleman said to the merchant, “was this a demonstration you arranged for us, or is this a genuine thief?”

“Or something out of our hands entirely?” murmured the one woman in the party who was not arrayed as a soldier.

“Whatever it is,” growled Allred, “it’s the little scamp who emptied my cash box, I’ll wager. All right, out with it!” he barked at Habie. He leaned down so his face filled her whole field of vision. “These are the High King’s soldiers, see Missy? And if you fuss, they’ll take you straight to the castle dungeons rather than the nice city jail, so just you up and hand over my gold!”

Habie made a face, then reached into her shirt and pulled out the leather pouch. With a wistful look, she surrendered it to Allred. The guards set her down, putting up their weapons but holding her fast. As they sheathed their swords, however, one snagged the left shoulder of her tunic. The light fabric was no match for steel, and the tunic tore—just a bit, so her left shoulder was exposed. She winced. The clothes on her back were about all she had come away with when her last family had turned her out; she had nothing with which she could replace a damaged garment.

She winced a second time as a gentle hand touched her shoulder. Then



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she looked, her eyes traveling from hand to arm to shoulder to face. Standing over her was the lone woman attired as a civilian: a full-blooded Carotian noble by the look of her. For a moment, as her eyes met the woman's, Habie wore the expression of a child of the streets who has gone begging and found a door that opened not on charity, graceless and grudging, but on the welcoming home she has sought all her life. The woman smiled back as if she grasped the direction of Habie's thoughts and understood them—as if, in fact, she knew that for Habie, the road to that door might somehow begin here before her with this moment of shared communion and was content that it should be so.

"Odd place for a tear," she commented, and her voice, too, was kind in the way it could only be if gentleness and mercy formed an essential part of her nature. "May I see?" She waited till Habie, still wearing a bemused expression, nodded vaguely. Then she did a curious thing: she widened the tear slightly and nodded once as if satisfied on some point that she and the other humans had been debating. She gestured to the others to look. A hush stole over the room. Suddenly, all around the two women, people were kneeling and bowing their heads, making signs of blessing and murmuring prayers of thanks to the Pantheon. Of the men, only the nobleman who had intercepted Habie remained on his feet, but there was about him the same sense of awestruck reverence that had taken the rest in its grip.

The nobleman waited a beat as if to give the moment its due, then tilted Habie's chin up—not roughly, as if he suspected her of lying or worse, but carefully, as though he liked her and just wanted her to meet his eyes so she could see that for herself. And she looked. If there was a spell here, it was one the man and woman cast by virtue of their mere presence—and in that moment, she was utterly ensnared. "Looks like it won't be the dungeons or the city jail for you, little one." His face had never lost its spark of amusement, but his voice, like the woman's, was kind.

"What, then?" she demanded, shrugging away from them both. She made the mistake of listening to the words instead of the tone of voice and felt the threads of the spell start to fray at the edges. She might have been expecting him to tell her she was about to be flogged—which she had been, more than once.

"You mind your tone, girl," growled Allred. "This is the High King and Queen over the entire Union you're talking to."

"Yeah, so? A lot of good they've ever done *me!*" Defiance personified, no matter the cost. The last thread snapped, and that was it for the spell. She tried to back away from everyone at once and met nothing but a wall of guards.

"It's all right," Avador, the King, assured the merchant. He had not taken his eyes from the young Lemurian's face; his voice was still kind despite her deliberate affront. "I read a hard life in this one, a life of preparation that has often seemed to her nought but senseless pain."

"Don't be frightened," soothed the woman, whom Habie now understood to be Ariane, the High Queen. She stooped so she and Habie were more nearly eye-to-eye but made no attempt to touch her again. "You have been marked for service by Minissa herself."

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"What?" the girl exclaimed.

"Look at your shoulder."

Squinting and crossing her eyes, Habie could just make out a dark brown patch in the fur on her left shoulder. It was shaped like the head of a great stag. "Where did *this* come from?" she fumed. "What is it? What's it mean? Get it off me! Here, I don't worship your gods. I don't worship *my* gods!" She looked like she wanted someone to come forward and excise the mark for her—now! Since no one did, she spat on her fingers and tried to rub it off, as if it were a smudge of dirt.

"No need to worship any gods, if they need you," Avador said congenially. "I think you'd best come with us."

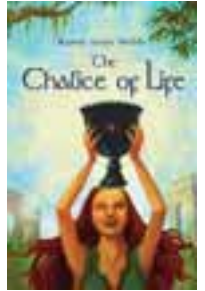
She looked sullen. "I've just been caught scrobbing this gentleman's money. Don't tell me you're not going to attend to *that* first." She might have been daring him to punish her. The defiance in her posture, though, hid a moment of self-doubt. Was it possible that half a lifetime of escaping detection was attributable not to her own skill but to the intervention of some goddess she'd never had anything to do with? *Eek!* she thought. *What if it's true and she's decided to cash in all those favors at once like so many poker chips??!! Wait a bit, though, she reasoned. Can't I make them take me to jail? A long enough hitch in the nick would wipe the slate clean and keep me from doing whatever service they had in mind for me, right?! Right? RIGHT??!!* This last came out as a desperate mental scream.

Her brashness, however, did little to faze the High King, and she hid the sudden fit of nerves well enough that he did not remark on it. "Oh, I think Allred will forbear to press charges for now," he said amiably. "If you returned everything you -er- scrobbled?"

Looking less contrite than resigned to her fate, she pulled from an inside pocket the jeweled ring she had palmed when she had returned Allred's gold to him. The merchant snatched it away, shaking his head and looking heavenward in mute appeal.

No one ever asked Minissa what she sought when she scoured the cosmos in search of the perfect questor, nor could she have easily put her thoughts into words. There were times when her fellow deities wondered what was in her mind (or simply if she had lost it) when she visited the Stag of Minissa on some unsuspecting creature who had never heard of the Union or its antecedents, or of the Pantheon, of the Ethic or the Art or the Disciplines. But they had never asked, and she had never offered to explain, and her chosen had never failed to acquit themselves. *Not yet*, some of her divine siblings grumbled when they got a look at the place from which her lone outworld questor hailed, but they kept silent about their misgivings till they had taken the time to study the man himself. And the more they studied, the more those misgivings vanished into the mists...

Mosaia, Lord Clear Water, was a man of such virtue that his brother knights often made sport of his piety. "What will happen if you miss your prayers once?" they teased. "Will your hair fall out?" Or, "Would being with



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a woman one time deprive you of your strength?" They were generally good-natured about it, as they might not have been with a commander who had erected his wall of piety as a barrier to distance himself from his fellow man. Mosaia had many fine qualities—compassion, swift judgment in the field, a keen intellect, a sense of humor—so his men found him easy to admire. He also had the strength of a small giant: though he had what many would have referred to as a long fuse, no one in his right mind wanted to be on the receiving end of his wrath if that fuse ever burned to the point of ignition.

He took it all in stride.

He loved the lore of living things. Sometimes, when he would retreat to the woodlands to commune with the Divine, the very trees would incline their branches toward him, and small woodland creatures would hop up and look on in adoration. Had Mosaia done any of his praying or meditating in a Carotian woodland, the dryads themselves might have popped out of their trees to converse with him, and the woodland creatures might actually have spoken—things they would not have done for every Carotian who came their way.

Though the exigencies of his homeland had brought him young to the battlefield, Mosaia had always been happiest when he was studying the arts of peace in tandem with the arts of war. He loved poetry, philosophy, and the contemplation of the mysteries of the universe. He saw in chivalry an ideal for which all men should strive rather than a sterile code of conduct that could only be a means to an end. He was a keen observer of human nature as well as a fair judge of character, so his men, though they teased, often came to him for advice. He had developed a reputation for fairness on those occasions when he had been forced to discipline his men or to serve as judge in his father's baronial court.

But now, Mosaia himself had a problem that begged advice, and no one to whom he could easily turn. A strange brown mark, in form like to the head of one of the wild stags that roamed the forests, had appeared on his left shoulder. No warning, just—poof! There it was one morning when he awoke. Although use of the Black Arts was rare on Falidia and its practitioners vigorously prosecuted when they were found out, he toyed with the thought that the mark meant he had become the victim of a curse. He immediately rejected that line of reasoning as nonsense. Nevertheless, when both praying and trying to scrub the mark off in the shower failed to excise it, he became sufficiently alarmed to seek help.

Being a knight in holy orders, as were his father and most of the knights in the barony, he sought out the family's house priest: a jovial, canny, and ridiculously knowledgeable older man named Brother Paulus. Rather than make the sign against the evil eye and order Mosaia exorcized (or any other such foolishness), he examined the mark thoughtfully, saying, "I can't picture anyone trying to lay a curse on you, my boy, or to cast a spell—unless it were maybe a love spell." He clapped Mosaia on the shoulder in a show of camaraderie—an older brother telling a younger his teasing is only meant in good fun—when the younger man colored at the suggestion. If women still escaped Mosaia's notice, it had been some years

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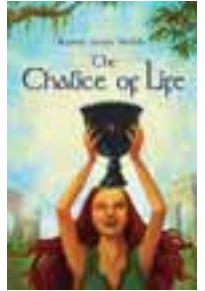
since he had escaped theirs.

Brother Paulus led Mosaia to his library. He made a great show of ascertaining that no one was hiding under the tables or in the study nooks and that they were not otherwise being observed, all of which puzzled Mosaia. He understood the reason for the display of secrecy, however, as Paulus slipped a hand behind one of the numerous dividers that separated one bookshelf from the next. A soft click and Paulus was carefully swinging open a concealed panel. Inside was not a single volume or even a sparse collection but an entire library—everything from small monographs to huge, weighty tomes bound in velvet and lettered in gold. While Paulus pulled out several of the largest volumes, Mosaia cocked his head in an effort to read some of the other titles. A bemused frown on his face, he reached a tentative hand to touch a spine here, a spine there. The titles whose languages he could read told him this was a collection of works on the theology and symbologies of cultures not his own. A few described the faiths of the diverse cultures of Falidia itself, but most dealt with those of the worlds beyond the system to which the small, relative backwater of Falidia belonged.

“You just appreciate that I’m showing you these at all, young Mosaia,” Paulus scolded congenially as he paged through one tome after another. “If our Pontifical College had a less scholarly bent, I reckon I could be burned at the stake for having so much as handled some of this material, and let’s not even discuss all the dark and dangerous days and nights I spent coming by most of it.” He reached over and tapped the spine of a book lettered in an alphabet Mosaia could not begin to comprehend. “See this one here? It describes a culture that worships no deity at all but only Primordial Chaos. That one next to it discusses the veneration of what we would call Hellspawn; its companion volume there discusses the opposite, the society that acknowledges no godhead but lives by a simple ethic finer than the code of law espoused by our greatest leaders. One or two of them talk about cultures that hold no good *higher* than the Law. It’s all very interesting to read about, not that I can imagine trying to live in some of these places!” he chuckled. “Well, I knew all of this would come in handy one day, and for more than my own intellectual curiosity...”

He tried various “hart” and “deer” entries without success, but when he tried “stag,” he was rewarded. In a volume bearing the curious name *Sidereal Singularities and the Societies They Shape* (a title Paulus as a serious student of cultural anthropology could not resist adding to his collection), he found the information they sought. A detailed chapter on the Carotian Union described not only the celestial messenger called the Stag of Minissa but the mark that bore its name; included in the section were several photographs of the mark as it appeared on living tissue of various sorts.

“‘The Pantheon of gods worshiped in this system,’” Paulus read, “‘is said to indicate those they single out for special favor by marking them physically at birth or later...’ Hmm... ‘typically appears on the left shoulder... the rarest of all these marks... not unknown in races outside those in the Union...’ Ah, here we are! ‘The Stag of Minissa is less a mark



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of favor than a means of pointing out those few chosen to go on a quest of great moment to the Carotians and their near kin, the Erebites and Thalacians.' Well now! I always knew you would save the world one day, my boy, but I expected the world you saved would be Falidia! It looks like our Great Lord in Heaven may have other plans for you, though He chooses to work them through an agent with whose name we are unfamiliar!"

"Minissa," he went on, flipping back a few pages, "seems to be a nature goddess of some sort. The entry says that in the past the parties chosen by her have done all sorts of marvelous things—unearthed long-lost relics that were the key to timely knowledge that saved empires, felled malign beasts that were ravaging entire worlds, freed prisoners from spells so baneful they could have enslaved a whole race." He grunted. "What an interesting collection of domains these deities have: life and death, mercy and justice, wisdom and scholarship..."

"The great dualities of life," Mosaia murmured, peering over the priest's shoulder. He touched a hand to a photograph of a high meadow at whose center stood an ancient, shaggy tree of immense girth. It may have been a trick of the light, but a soft glow seemed to emanate from the leaves. By a sense beyond the physical, he thought he could hear the music of harps. There was a strange gleam in his eye, and it was not one of offense at these concepts so at variance with his own beliefs. He was glimpsing a pool of living brilliance through the trees near his front door and confronting a tiny spark of hope that the brilliance might be more than a trick of the moonlight. For a brief moment, he allowed that small, struggling spark to break free and saw himself approaching the trees to find nestled among their branches not moon shadows, but an elven queen, and among their roots not trampled grass, but a shimmering trail of fairy dust.

But the edifice of practicality that contained that small spark had been long in the building; its walls were thick and very high. He shook off the vision. "What else does it say?" he asked, his veneer of prosaic calm once again in place. Yet he wondered even as he said it if his air of nonchalance was coming off as a bit too practiced.

Paulus grinned, but his regard was that of one who sees through the artifice of a small child. "Not too much more about the Stag of Minissa. The system itself certainly is strangely configured: three worlds similar to ours in climate and atmosphere. Well, that's not strange at all, but it seems they share a single orbit, like points on an equilateral triangle, around a double primary. Its inhabitants are said to be—hmmm... interesting!—powerful workers of magic." He grinned whimsically. "Well, I should hope so—I don't see what else could hold such a configuration together!"

Mosaia backed at the overt mention of magic and caught himself making the sign against the evil eye. So much for his small spark of hope! A lifetime of conditioning would not be an easy thing to undo. "Magic? On a world whose deities embody such noble concepts?"

Paulus looked thoughtful as he scanned the entry. "To read this, I would say that *their* magic is what *we* might call the benevolent arts of the spirit world. I see nothing here that suggests they treat with the Fiend or bend nature in any way that our own good God would censure."

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“And this is where I must go?” It came out so doubtful as to be gruff, yet deep inside him that little spark was tugging ever more insistently at his heart.

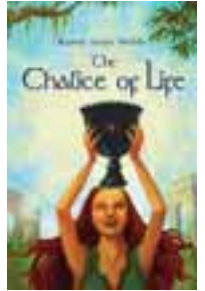
He sucked his cheeks. “‘Must?’ Obedience is a virtue, Mosaia, but I think neither their Minissa nor our Heavenly Father is best pleased if we obey from of a sense of obligation that has no love to motivate it, be we priest or page or knight-errant.”

Mosaia grunted out a laugh, but it was a mirthless sound. “And when was the last chance I had to ride on errantry with the countryside at war since I was small enough to hide in the skirts of your cassock?”

Paulus scratched what was left of the hair on his head. “Well, my boy, those wars may have deprived you of your chance to ride on errantry, but at least some good’s come of them—as far as you’re concerned, at any rate. The last peace accords declared the city of Waterford a neutral zone and set up a body to oversee Falidia’s contact with other worlds. The Carotian Union has no representative there, and never will while the church keeps its stranglehold on the collective mind of the civilized world. However, if I’m not mistaken, there is an office there for the Independent Trading Worlds, of which the Union—” He indicated one of the footnotes. “—is a founding member.”

The spark of hope tugged a bit more insistently at Mosaia’s heart, as if to say, “Look at the way the forces of the universe are allying with one another to ease your path, you great oaf!” A mighty river was beckoning to him, as near as it was vast; the speed and strength of its current would sweep him away if he took a single step forward. He had been raised with the axiom that smooth and straight lay the path to perdition while the road to Paradise was strewn with obstacles. Still, try as he might, he could not believe that this path, however smooth, was the path of evil. He looked for a moment as if he would take that step: something in him longed to respond to the way those visions of rivers and paths were reaching out to embrace him. Again, he shook himself free of the spell, and for a reason far more worthy than any he had yet given, and infinitely more fundamental to his nature. “But—why me? Why anyone from Falidia at all, but why *me*? I am no one of any great remark, I serve my father, I serve our one good God, I—”

Paulus burst out laughing. “Don’t use that protest with me, Mosaia—I’ve known you too long! You are a worthy knight and your father’s heir in more than body and a loyal servant of the Church. But if you keep to yourself the idea that we should not profane the Mysteries of another people just because those Mysteries have forms dissimilar to our own, I know you think it; you simply don’t profess it aloud because you fear to bring dishonor to the Clear Water name by being branded a heretic. An open mind about such things is a precious rare commodity on this world, Mosaia; we would have been at peace long ago, if the Pontifex Maximus acknowledged that the light that illumines all of Creation is one, though the vessels that bear it take other form than ours. I shudder for the day he tries to excommunicate the entire population of one of the few worlds with whom we’ve established cordial trading relations! No, Mosaia, if this



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Minissa has no other virtue to her name, then I think well of her that she must value such a mind as yours to have chosen you. I wish more thought as you did!”

Another short laugh as mirthless as the last. “More probably do, but like me, they fear a black mark from the local pontifex. And how could a pontifex—how could anyone with a brain in his head or faith in his heart—justify such an action? Are not the roots of our own faith polyvalent? Do we not revere as heroes men who have come to our aid from the Tribes, heroes who worshiped an All-Mother rather than an All-Father, or the many spirits of wood and river?” His brow darkened and furrowed with frustration as if this were a debate he had had a score of times with many score fools since the day the light of truth had first illumined his great soul. If fruitless polemic had eventually taught him the wisdom to keep his own counsel—at least, till he was sure he had obtained a hearing—he had never lost sight of those beliefs. Those beliefs, as well as the hope that there was a spirit world with which men could interact and live to tell the tale, had come to possess a special, sheltered place in his heart.

Paulus, regarding the interplay of frustration and hope on Mosaia’s fine features and recalling many a long talk they had had in the privacy of his study, framed his thoughts this way: *Here, he thought, is a man who once, in childhood, saw evidence of the existence of angels and dryads and other goodly folk of the spirit world. Here is a man who has just taken a look deep within his own soul and found something still clinging to hope that such a spirit world might be, even though he believes his evidence vanished long ago and every prosaic Falidian instinct he possesses tells him all his “evidence” ever amounted to was the fancy of childhood. And here is a man who, for all he has come into the flower of Falidian knighthood and put away childish things, has suddenly felt the breath of air that might, if he were to allow it, fan that small spark of hope into flame.* And in the silence of his heart, he uttered a prayer—not his first, but certainly his most fervent—on his friend’s behalf. *Go, Mosaia, he said, focusing every last particle of his will. Find the adventure that will acquit your hope, then come back and save us all.*

Aloud, he said, “You prove yourself more worthy of such a call with every word you speak.” A glimmer of pride flickered in his eyes. “As to the gods—theirs or ours or anyone else’s—I think a name matters little so we do with a good will the work it is given us to do. A Pantheon whose fruits are peace and justice is, if you need to hear it from the lips of a priest, one you may serve in good conscience. Think of it as one of the community barn raisings the tenants have from time to time. Folk from all around come to help, though it’s not their farm. You could look at yourself as being on loan to the next holding, eh?”

“Though that holding is halfway across the galaxy?” he laughed, and this time the sound was like a wellspring of giddy joy gushing forth from the center of his being.

Paulus’ face broke into a smile almost of recognition. “Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here,” he said in a bemused sort of way.

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Mosaia knew a quote when he heard one, though he had not heard this particular one pass the priest's lips before. "Is this a bit of outworld scripture you're quoting to speed me on my way?"

Paulus chuckled. "Not at all. Really, Mosaia, you must broaden your horizons! It's from a blessing used by one of the Tribes:

'Hold on to what is good, even if it is a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe even if it is a tree that stands by itself.

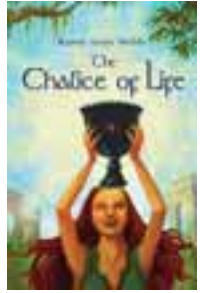
Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here.

Hold on to life even when it is easier letting go.

Hold on to my hand even when I have gone away from you.'

"Whatever its source, whatever its wording, go with the greatest blessing this foolish old man can bestow on you."

Warmed by the priests' words, Mosaia touched a hand to the book they had been reading; it lay open to the page that spoke of the assemblage of deities the Carotians simply called "the Pantheon." "A fool's errand, some would say," he mused, deliberately trading on Paulus' humble (but to his mind, highly inaccurate) characterization of himself. "Well, perhaps in the Carotian Union their gods require fools rather than knights to achieve the great deeds of their times." He smiled reflectively, and the gleam that had taken up residence in his eye as hope won out over doubt moved outward until it encompassed his whole face.



"OK," Habie said once they were out in the street and she was satisfied they were heading in the general direction of the palace rather than the jail. "I'll bite, as long as you're tossing out the bait."

"Minissa has chosen you for a quest," Ariane explained, "one vital to the survival of the Union. Whoever accepts this task and succeeds at it will become the sort of hero whose deeds live on in legend and history for generations."

The chortle she hooted out was bigger than she was. "*That's* a laugh! *Me* save the Union? *Me* become a hero? What, were her 'holy messengers' like this Stag of Minissa playing hooky or having you on or something?"

Ariane gave her a tolerant half-smile. "Yes, yes, no, and neither are we."

It took Habie a moment to come up with a rebuttal as she tried to connect the Queen's answers with her own questions. "So, I get to do it all by myself?" she tried with as much challenge as curiosity.

"No, not unless you want to scamper off ahead of the rest."

"Oh, so is it all street kids doing your dirty work for you? Is that it? Round us all up and send us packing, conveniently blame the choice of participants on one of your goddesses, and if we all go belly up and don't come back, it's that many less mouths for the State's dole queues come the start of the month?"

Ariane flashed the smile of a person who has gotten the point of a joke

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everyone else is missing but does not want to advertise the fact, but it was Avador who spoke. “Yes, Habie,” he said smoothly, “it’s a new plan we’re trying out to ease the public relief. The economists devised it, the priests sanctioned it, and the best sorcerers in the Union put it into effect. It’s our job—Ari’s and mine—to run around ‘discovering’ people marked with the Stag and to see them bundled off on a quest we made up one day when things were a little slow in the ruling-the-kingdom department. It’s only one of several economic initiatives we have in the works. May I ask you as a citizen in the street and one of our first test subjects what you think of it?”

Ariane had gone up a few points in Habie’s estimation when she had not come unglued at Habie’s attempts to undermine what she as Queen undoubtedly held sacred, but Avador’s speech stopped her in her tracks. She had never heard a human, let alone a king, deadpan before. She slanted her eyes up at him, but his expression was so inscrutable she was forced to feel around inside his head a little to see if he was mocking her. He wasn’t, she decided from the quick scan. He was only needling her, something he only seemed to do to people he liked—or wanted to like. She wrinkled her small face in thought as she made the assessment: reaching for his mind had been more reflex than anything else, but she had felt a sensation like a shield being lowered just before she connected. Had he had some sort of mental defense in place and deliberately lowered it to let her in? Hadn’t she heard somewhere that the humans had rules about mentalic interaction, that breaching a mind uninvited was a more serious crime in their society than physical assault? If he had sensed her probing, why had he let her in at all? Briefly, she wished she had at some point made friends with a priestess of Eliannes, or someone in her own society who could have helped her refine her use of the mindtouch.

While she was grappling with all of this, Ariane stepped in with, “My own sister, Mistra, was chosen—chosen first, in fact, before any of you. Her native facility with the Art excels even mine, and if you insist on acting like such a vainglorious snob when you meet her, she may just turn you into a toad.”

Here was something she could deal with. “Vainglorious? Snob? *Me?*”

“Intolerance and bigotry can work in both directions, Habie.”

Strike number two between the eyes. “Well,” she recouped weakly, “who says I’m going anywhere, anyway? I told you I don’t subscribe to your gods—yours or anyone’s.”

“Well, you’re not losing any love on these people,” observed Avador.

“No,” she admitted. “And I guess not losing love works in both directions, too.” She flicked a mischievous glance at Ariane, who smiled in a way that accorded her the point.

“Ah, so neither are they losing love on you?” the King interpreted aloud—and immediately felt a stab of pain choke his heart. He had been content to allow Habie to draw the reassurance she had needed directly from his mind a moment ago: his own mental skills were so prodigious he could have managed that with a complete psi-null. Now he saw he needn’t have bothered to *allow* her in; she had just pierced his defenses all by herself with that groundswell of emotion! She must be enormously gifted in

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the empathic skills native to the Lemurian people; all she lacked was finesse.

While that was information worth cataloguing for later action, what smote his heart in a way that told him he must act *now* was the agonizing sense that he had just trespassed on sacred ground. *She* might joke about her own station in life; that he assumed that *he* might also joke had been a gross miscalculation. He had just wounded her deeply. No, he corrected himself; he had not wounded but had exposed a wound that had perhaps been kept too long from the light. In that pain that had taken his heart so by surprise, there was no blame. If he had not felt it, he would never have guessed from her face what she was experiencing, and he could barely have gleaned it from the way her posture stiffened—minimally, for a bare instant.

I am sorry, kuchika, he sent directly into her mind. I am sorry for my misstep, and for the pain that has been your life.

Her head snapped around. There was wonder in her eyes, not at the presence of a voice in her head—everyone knew that the royalty of Ereb possessed such mental force that they could order the body of a dying man to heal itself from halfway across the planet and have it respond—but that he cared. She had never heard the formal language of Old Thalybdenos before, but she picked up an image from his mind: *kuchika* meant “little one” and was an endearment one might use with a favored younger sibling! She felt a pang of longing as she tried and failed to formulate a reply. *Why didn't I bother to nick a book on Lemurian mysticism at some point along the way?* she found herself asking. The discipline she had forborne to learn suddenly rose from the grave in which she had buried it and loomed up to haunt her.

“Yeah, OK,” she said, sobering a little. “So what’s the deal? If this quest has Carotian royalty in it, then you’ve got all the hocus-pocus stuff you could ever want. What does your Minissa need me for?”

Ariane flashed her an inscrutable half-smile. “When one of the Pantheon manifests, she—or he—typically tell us no story but our own.”

“Huh?”

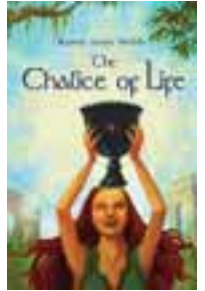
“She means we’re not clear on the specifics, Habie. That you’re marked with the Stag shows you *were* chosen, but you might be in a better position to say why than we are.”

“To read the annals of other quests,” Ariane put in, “and, believe me, I’ve read quite a few since Minissa scooped up my sister—the questors themselves didn’t always know what they had to contribute till the moment came when what they had hidden inside spilled forth.”

“You mean she picks a whole bunch of real unremarkable people who don’t do anything in particular, because she knows that when the monsters attack—wham!—they’ll turn into the heroes she needs?”

Her smile widened. “You’re not at all unremarkable, Habie.”

Wondering why simple kindness and truth unpolluted by craft should be so hard to bear, Habie dropped her eyes. “Yeah, I’m a completely remarkable thief. I’m draffing incredible! If Minissa needs the enemy distracted by someone making a spectacle of botching a simple robbery in



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broad daylight, I'm her woman."

Reading the self-derogation in the remark rather than attending to the way she had phrased it, Avador turned to Habie and rested a hand on her shoulder. It was a show of amiability, and it allowed him to stop her for a moment, but there was more. If she were the sort of empath who needed physical touch to guide her deeply into her subject's heart, he was happy to give permission before she was compromised into asking. They had now reached one of the small parks that bordered the marketplace. The crowds thinned considerably here, and it would be easier for the masses to keep a respectful distance while he and Ariane took the moment he felt they needed to communicate with Habie in private.

"You're a savvy young lady, my darling," he said agreeably, "so I won't hand you a pile of drek. We caught you so easily only because we knew exactly where to look."

She blinked twice in astonishment—once at the way his sincerity was not feigned, a second time at his words. She cocked an appreciative eyebrow at his use of the local slang. She had expected to be reprimanded for using it herself in front of the Queen, not to be matched with such nonchalance. "How?" she asked, conscious that the note of challenge was slipping away.

"Minissa told me," replied Ariane, casually slipping her hand into Avador's and signing to their entourage to halt.

Habie heard herself say, "That's silly," but she regretted the thought even as the words left her lips. Something in the Queen's earlier remark about the gods manifesting had hinted at this, but she had not at that point been prepared to wrap her mind around the concept of deific visitation. She wasn't sure she was prepared now! But her ideas about preparation and visitations slid by the wayside as a sudden golden warmth suffused her. She gasped at the sudden sense of connection she felt with the King and Queen. Her lack of training left her with no explanation for the way she seemed suddenly to have entered both their minds at once. The only thing that made sense was that both the King and Queen had had enough experience with the mindtouch that they were the ones facilitating this link. They were letting her probe, welcoming her in as if they were inviting her to dinner in the most lavish room in the palace and treating her as an honored guest. She had the strangest sense that what she was perceiving about them both represented the essential truth of their being. So many Lemurians had one face that they showed to the world, a pleasant facade that hid insides that were all dark and twisty. The lavish room into which they had welcomed her was nothing they had fancied up just to impress her while they let the rest of their palace fall into ruin. The image told her that the face they presented to the world accurately reflected what lay within, that all the grace and splendor and beauty she perceived with her physical eyes completely matched their inward reality.

More surprising, they were not probing back: she had no sense that they felt it was their right to pull from her mind by force what they had willingly shared of themselves. *But they could!* she thought in amazement as she took in the enormity of the power arrayed before her. That someone

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might possess the power to undermine a will—to blot out a life with no more effort than she would use to crush a gnat!—and not use it was incomprehensible to her. Yet here inside these two living minds stood her proof.

“Minissa told you?” she asked at last, and her voice sounded weak in her own ears. Words that had sounded so clever and a bearing that had seemed so cagey a moment ago seemed suddenly vain and shallow.

Ariane smiled kindly and slipped from the link with infinite care. “The Holy Ones have honored me with visitations from time to time.” Her voice had the quality of music coming from a place beyond the grief and woe of this life, and for a moment, the light of the divine shone in her face.

Habie was drawn in by the beauty that was more than physical, but she could only bear it for an instant. She dropped her eyes less from fear of the radiance burning her than from a sense that she was profaning it merely by looking. “What is it we’re supposed to do?” she asked haltingly.

“You go to find a prince who was lost many centuries ago.”

The brassiness she had spent a lifetime developing could not be gotten rid of so easily, but she kept from her voice what harshness she could. “Well—isn’t there already enough royalty to go around and then some?”

“Not quite enough of the right kind,” said Avador. “This one is the only one who can unite Thalass before it descends into civil war.”

“So? Thalass is a whole ‘nother world.”

He exchanged a look with his wife that said, “You don’t know the half of it.” Aloud, he said, “Ari, would you oblige me?”

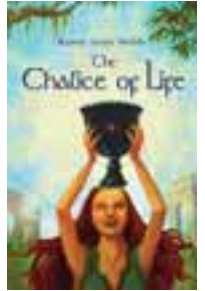
She gave him the sort of smile that said she enjoyed obliging him anytime, anywhere. Kneeling so Habie could see what she was doing, she put her hands together. When she separated them, between them lay an image like a tiny, perfect hologram of their star system.

Habie’s eyes widened, and her mouth formed into a little “O” of wonder. All trace of the wall she usually maintained between herself and the outside world—the one that had been getting shakier by the minute this past half hour—vanished. “Is this us?” she asked, pointing to the greenest of the three small worlds.

Avador followed Ariane’s example and crouched so he was not speaking down to Habie in any sense of the word. “Uh-huh.” He pointed. “Us, Erebus, and Thalass here.” He eyed her closely. “We fought a war, you know, I’d say a year or two before you were born.”

“I’ve—heard stories,” she said quietly. She actually shivered.

He caught a flash like an echo of pained memory and only stopped himself from following where he had not been invited by main force of will. Even so, he saw a grave and a storm and a Lemurian woman about Habie’s age with a spectre like a death fetch hovering just beyond her shoulder. “Yes—well,” he tripped over his tongue a little in his effort to curb his curiosity—what a fascinating story this youngster must have! “Right. Thalass made war on Caros and Erebus, Ariane and I became overnight heroes by winning the war single-handedly—*double*-handedly, I should say.” He exchanged a grin with Ariane. “It’s what the bards say, if not the history books, eh?”



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"I wouldn't know," Habie grumbled under her breath.

"Anyway, we thought the Pantheon might like it if, rather than turning the Thalacians into our slaves, we united with them under a single government—that's the two of us, our Council, the Nonacle, and so on—and treated them as equals."

"And so far it's worked on paper," Ariane continued. "But the spirit of mistrust fostered by the sort of monarchy that would declare a war of conquest on its peaceful sister-worlds—it's never quite gone away. The—" She paled for a fraction of a second and swallowed; Habie caught a stab of pain from her as if the Queen attached some horrific memory to this episode for all she and Avador had come out of it with the highest offices in the land. "The king who declared the war and his son, the heir to the throne, were both killed in that conflict. After them, the line of succession got a little muddled."

"To tell you the truth," said Avador, "the place was a shambles when we got hold of it."

Ariane flashed him an amused grin and went on. "After them, no one was really interested in *having* a king. The Toths were tyrants of the worst kind, and for a while the princes and petty barons seemed content to have their authority back."

"*Too* content! Do you have any idea what a coalition government is, Habie?"

She gave him a look that scathed. "I'm uneducated, not stupid."

He chuckled. "What you are, little one, is a piece of work! All right. Ereb and Caros have been worlds united under their own monarchs since the Exodus—getting the hang of dealing with a High King and Queen did not require a lot of imagination from them, or a lot of effort. Thalac was another story—still is, really."

"Their coalition of princes and petty barons isn't working well," offered Ariane.

"Let me guess," Habie said dryly. "Once these heavyweights got their power back, they didn't want to give any of it up again."

"Exactly. And the Thalacian royal line that sprang from the Exodus has been so badly mangled through the centuries that there is no single living person whose claim all will acknowledge."

Habie took three seconds to put two and two together. "You mean this quest of yours is one where we're gonna go wake the dead?" Her expression was hard to read—she might have been simultaneously repelled and drawn by the idea. She settled on being drawn and gave them a perky smile. "Lethal!"

"Well, it's not exactly bringing the dead to life," said Avador. "It's more like -um-"

"Bringing the living to life?" Ariane suggested with a wry grin.

"Yeah, OK, I can live with that," Habie assured them.

"Listen first. You know the humans here—what most people in-system and out just call the Carotians—came from another world." A large globe appeared in her array, larger and orbiting the suns along a track perpendicular to the orbital plane of the other three.

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"Yeah, every Lemurian knows that us and the Tigroids were here first, just like the *Aranyaka* on Ereb and the Inygwees on Thalás."

"Queen Thalacia, the first Thalacian queen, established her line after the Exodus, but it was broken in the sixth generation. All of the histories say that both the ruling king and his heir were killed in a palace coup, the king by poison and the heir by—dark magic. But last year, when the problems on Thalás were coming to a head, people all over the Union began having visions, visions of a prince lying on a bier in a peaceful forest." She shrugged so the image wobbled a little. "Somewhere."

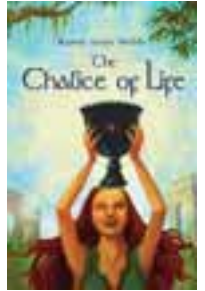
Avador's voice sank to an awed whisper. Habie had become engrossed in the story some time ago; now their escort leaned in as well. Avador's voice took on that quality Ariane's had from time to time of being possessed not by man but by god. "We went, Ari and I, to Thalás, guided in space by a star and on the ground by a sheet of living flame. Castle Toth was abandoned after the war, pronounced desecrated ground by the priests and not fit to be cleansed. Ghosts walk there now, but it is not an empty place. There at Castle Toth, in a vault whose door was so hidden by design and debris that only the hand of the gods could have led us to it, was a small book, only about so big." He outlined a space the size of a thin journal. "It was the journal of the mage who was supposed to have killed the heir, along with his testimonial about the part he had played. And it was not the story written in the history books or sung by the bards, but something completely—*other*." He nodded to Ariane as if to say, "Let the real expert on magic explain it for you."

"You see, Habie," Ariane took up the tale, "his explanation was that he had cast his spell not to harm the prince but to help him. He said that a third party, a mage easily his equal and possibly the equal of the prince himself, had cast the baneful spell, the spell that should have killed. His sworn testimony was that he fired his protective spell an instant after the assassin-mage fired the one that would have killed the Prince but that the effect was—well, the effect was that, when the smoke cleared, both the Prince and the assassin were gone, and he had some explaining to do. Soon after we discovered the journal, my sister came zipping in from the outworlds saying that Minissa had claimed her. She herself, with the help of some tools we have only in the palace here on Caros, divined this story without talking to anyone, without probing anyone's mind, without anything but the guidance of Minissa herself. She saw the quest unfold and looked into a place not in this universe—the place where the Lost Prince of Thalás came to his final rest in an enchanted sleep."

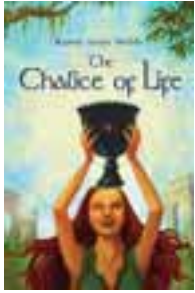
"And the long and short of it," concluded Avador, "is that if we—you—find the Prince, Eliander, then Thalás will unite behind him and survive. And if you fail—if all of you so much as refuse to go—Thalás will be destroyed." He sighed. "And right behind Thalás will be Caros and Ereb."

Habie shook off the images that had unfolded in her mind as she heard all this. "Huh?"

Avador poked a finger into the image Ariane was projecting and flicked away the larger planet, the one-time human home-world, as if it were a domino. Nothing happened. Then he did the same to Thalás. The



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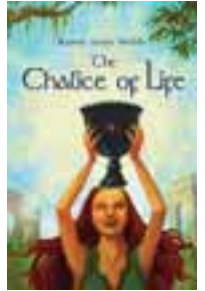
other two planets struggled to reorient their orbits in light of the sudden change in gravitational force in the shared orbit. Then they wobbled a little. Then their orbits started to decay. Finally, they went crashing into the sun. “The gods gave our people a chance to save themselves when Thalybdenos was destroyed,” he narrated. “If Thalás goes, there will be no second chance for us, and we’ll take your people, the Tigroids, the *Aranyaka*, the Inyewe—*everybody*—with us.”

Habie’s jaw looked like it would drop in horror, but just before it opened, she managed to scrape enough bricks together to put a portion of her wall back up. “Wait a minute! Hold it! You’re trying to trick me, forcing the two planets to sun dive with more magic or telepathy or something. Do it over again. Do it right!”

Ariane gave Habie an inscrutable smile, reset the image so all four planets orbited the binary sun, and nodded to her to try. When the girl had three times gotten the same results Avador had, Ariane brought the enigmatic smile back and said, “Magic, you see, is the entire point.”

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CHAPTER 2



The Response

“The Disciplines are a thing of the Mind and are subject to the same enhancements and infirmities as the intellect itself. But the Art, the tapping of the power of the Earth to shape the Ether—what the mundanes call Magic—is a thing of the Spirit...”
—ARAMINA OF CAROS, Headmistress, TALAMAZRA ACADEMY
Discourses on the Book of Life

31

Night had fallen long ago, but in pubs all over Caros City, the dark was being driven back by gossip, ale, and the glow of a friendly hearth. Boreo, the proprietor of the Town Scrier, leaned across the bar in the common room and cocked an eyebrow at the odd scene transpiring in one corner. There, at a table that could have seated half the City Watch, a cluster of Carotian men sat absorbed in a tale being spun by, of all things, a Thalacian. The fellow was lean and not bad to look at as outworlders went, yet he was built strongly enough that a quick glance would deter a thief from looking too long or too hard at his belt pouch. *No, it's more than just the muscles that would put me off if I were of larcenous intent*, the proprietor thought. *Involved as he is with telling his tale, broadly as he gestures, he's on the alert. Anyone who thinks to rifle through that pack beside him will be risking grievous bodily injury.*

“What do you make of that, Gus?” he asked his bartender, a spry

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Lemurian in his middle years.

“Of what, Mr. B?” asked the Lemurian. “Of a dozen of your best clients being mesmerized by the yarns of a Thalacian bard? Don’t worry! He’s attracted as many as he’s driven off, and they said to keep the ale pitchers coming. You’ll make money rather than losing it on that lot, never you fear!”

“A bard, is he?”

Gus grunted an affirmative. “And part of the Thalacian embassy, hand-picked by Ambassador Gil himself as he tells it.”

Now the proprietor grunted. “Then it’s no wonder a few of my regulars backed off. Half the men who come in here fought in the war.” He shook his head. “If the King and Queen—if the *High* King and Queen—can get past the harms the Thalacians did their families, I guess the rest of us should. But not all of us can. A nasty, cruel lot they were back then. Leastways, the royal family was, and when the old King or his son said jump, the Thalacians asked how high and in which direction. Still, it didn’t put off Ronn and his crew. Adopt him as a gesture of fellowship, did they?”

Gus screwed up his small face in a way that said he didn’t want to give his boss the lie to his face. “I don’t know about fellowship, Mr. B., not but that they’re acting friendly enough. I reckon some here *would* have adopted him as a gesture of fellowship, wanting no more than that, had he been no more than a Thalacian bootblack. Like as not *he’s* happy enough to linger in a place like this: your house must be a fair step up from the seedy corner tap rooms I remember from the one trip I took to Thalas after the war. But one thing more than fellowship holds this lot, if I may be so bold.”

“Yes, Gus? Go on!”

“News. They’re hungry for news from the palace.”

Boreo chuckled. Official news about the peace accords and negotiations and a mysterious quest had come from the palace, but it had been sparse and sketchy—not the way Strephan and Amina usually handled things, not by a long shot. “Is that—?” He tapped his temple to inquire if this was something the Lemurian had picked up with his empathic sense. “Or just simple eavesdropping?”

“Me, stoop to simple eavesdropping? Mr. B., you wound me!” His eyes glittered mischief. “Bit of both, actually. They were swilling ale so quickly I told Trina to attend to the other customers while I took over for her there. It’s because of them I’m so far behind in my washing up. Not ten minutes past, I was running pitchers over there so often I might as well have been in on the conversation.”

“Tell on, Gus, tell on!”

Gus picked up one of the four beer steins he had been washing and drying repeatedly and picked at some imaginary dirt. The only way the glass was going to get cleaner was if he used a sand blaster on it, but swirling the dishtowel around it allowed him to keep up the pretense that he was keeping busy between ale runs to the crowded table. “Well, his information about this quest for the Lost Prince of Thalas only served to warm them up. It turned out he had news of Princess Mistra—real news, not that bilge they dreamed up about her dying in a rockslide then having

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a miraculous resurrection the minute her consort cleared Union airspace. He says he and some of his mates have *seen* her. That's what really hooked them. For my money, right now he could be spitting on the graves of their ancestors, and they'd still be happily plying him with ale. He's going to have a mighty buzz on soon and a wicked hangover in the morning if he hasn't accustomed himself to Carotian spirits!"

Boreo disregarded his bartender's attempt at levity. "He's seen her?" Incredible! The Carotian people adored Mistra! Why would the King and Queen keep her hidden from sight if she had truly resurfaced?

"That's what he said. No, I tell a lie. One of his mates saw her." He gave up even pretending to wash up and leaned in close so he could whisper. "As he tells it, the reason nearly a third of the delegation from Thalac is musically inclined is that they were needed to serenade a mysterious figure of some sort—to serenade her round-the-clock for the first week they were here. As he tells it, the figure was veiled from head to toe, there was a partition between them and her, and the room in which this all took place was so alive with magic that a psi-null Thalacian infant would have stifled at the feel of it. Well, leave it to a Thalacian to sniff out a plot and probe a mystery the higher-ups want kept hush-hush, know what I mean?"

"That I do, Gus, that I do."

"He went on to say one of his mates managed to sneak a peek behind the partition. Evidently, his friend could make out a few female contours and features, all of the right size, age, and coloring to be our missing princess. He lost me for a bit at that point—something about a glowing sword and a wall of computer banks being behind the partition with her."

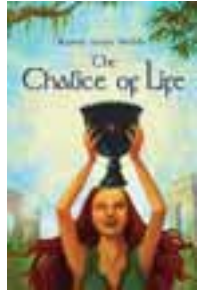
Boreo looked thoughtful. "Glowing sword and computers, eh?"

"That's what he said. Anyway, what this fellow here did was to sneak into the Royal Archives to see if he could figure out from some of your old lore books what might have made all that music necessary."

"Did he find anything out?"

"Apparently, he told them he learned that all that serenading could have been used on the right sort of person to help along the magical imprinting of a bundle of information. Does that all make any sense to you, Mr. B.?"

"It does, Gus, it does—especially the bit about using music on the right sort of person. I've heard of such things where an enchanter was forced to learn a spell too complex to get down in a hurry, or information so sensitive it had to be buried in the mind part and parcel till the exact moment it was needed." The proprietor knit his brow, thinking. He ranked as no more than average as far as access to the Art went, but he had picked up a thing or two on his travels before he had settled in to run the Scrier. "You know, Gus," he went on after a moment, "if this lost prince really exists, and if he's really, really lost—you know, not hidden in a dark cave somewhere but really, truly adrift in the cosmos..." He began to burn with a feverish intensity he normally reserved for balancing his books in a month when business was off and bills were due. "The Pantheon," he continued, "would have to send someone after this prince who could work extraordinary feats of magic, maybe even send along some sort of enchanted object, maybe like



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this glowing sword, that would do the job if its spells could be tapped. And who better to wield it—who better to go after this prince who's the last and only hope of Thalasia and the Union—but a child of the royal house consecrated to Minissa herself?"

"Works for me, boss, but what do I know? Minissa's got more sense than to send one of my kind running off into the blue on short notice to have adventures!" They had a hearty laugh over the Lemurian proclivity for hearth, home, and order. Then, abruptly, Gus' eyes snapped up.

"What's wrong, Gus?"

He shook his head as if to clear it, then scanned the cluster of Carotians and their lone Thalasian guest. "Dunno, boss." He brightened. "I do think I see those pitchers running dry again."

Boreo chuckled to himself at the way Gus filled six new pitchers and zipped over to the table at light speed, then served them and cleared away the empties with such care he looked like a holofilm run in slow motion. There was no one like Gus for unobtrusively gathering information! Boreo cocked his head at the group. He had less empathic sense than a week-old Lemurian child, but something about the group of men—body language, maybe, or a subtle change in some of their facial expressions—told him the emotional color of the group had just altered radically. Ronn and his contemporaries still looked as if they were extending an easy welcome to the Thalasian, but the men of Ronn's son's generation—the stranger and Ronn's son Abron in particular—were beginning to look like young rams that had just scented the only ewe in heat on their entire continent.

"Repenting of their welcome, are some of our young hotheads?" he asked as Gus returned.

"It's very strange," replied Gus. "To look at them, they're clowning around a bit as good friends will, but when I *feel* for what's going on..." He screwed up his small face again, this time as if trying to pull from the Ether the words that would explain what he sensed. "There's an ebb and flow of feeling there. On the surface, it looks like the Thalasian is just asking questions in all sincerity and that the Carotians are alternating between having their dander raised by thinking he's asking the unaskable and posturing down and looking sheepish when they realize that what he asked is something perfectly legitimate."

Boreo chortled. "Talking about women, are they?"

"They're talking about this and that and the other, but—yeh, at the heart of it, they're talking about women."

"Knew it."

"The odd thing is—and I feel it so strongly I can almost see lines of force drawn around the table connecting the stranger to our regulars—the Thalasian seems to be playing them a-purpose, same as he'd play the strings on his instrument. It's like he's the one in charge of making any tension at the table rise and recede. In fact, I think he *wants* to force them to close ranks against him, but only when he decides it's time."

Consternation warred with a simple lack of understanding, and he thought it all came out in his voice. "Can't say I like the sound of that, Gus."

"Nor me neither, Mr. B. But it's what's going on; I'll set my word on it

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against my entire month's wages."

Boreo considered, wondering if he should call last orders or simply tell everyone he was closing up early—or if he could rely on Gus to monitor them and give a holler right before the tension reached critical mass. Would the damage to his establishment if they did explode outweigh the profit to be made keeping the group in beer and pretzels as long as they remained civil?

The decision suddenly left his hands: Ronn came to his feet with such force he knocked over the table. The next instant, the entire party was standing and bracing for action. Boreo felt his mouth drop: Ronn was usually the settling influence on this particular crew, and the last one he would have expected to respond to the sort of provocation Gus had described. But he was not swinging yet; as long as he and the stranger kept talking, there might be a chance for reconciliation. Blast him for keeping his tone so clipped when he should have been shouting! All Boreo could catch to help him gauge the direction in which the exchange was about to go was something about how dilute and tainted the royal blood of Thalacians had become and the words, "It's no wonder you lost the war."

Ouch! Even without Gus's empathic sense, he could tell the Thalacian knew he had gone a bit too far with whatever remark had precipitated *that* reaction. He could also tell the young man had been ready to placate Ronn—right up till the moment the words "lost the war" had passed the older man's lips. If Carotians had more nerves to tweak than Thalacians, Thalacians still had a few, and Ronn had just trodden on the worst of the lot. The tension rose, thickened, came to a point where a single concession on either side might have defused it.

But the concession, if either was getting ready to offer it, came a beat too late. With no warning, the Thalacian catapulted across the table and tackled the older man. Down they went, swinging and kicking.

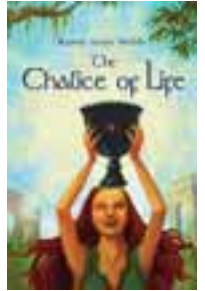
Boreo groaned.

The rest did not hesitate to jump in without invitation.

Boreo moaned. Carotians did not behave like this!

"Well, tonight I guess they do," he muttered to himself as half the pub joined in the fray. In minutes, he wondered if a customer strolling through the door in search of a pint would be able to tell who had started the brawl or who was on whose side. Alarmed at the way the fight was escalating, Boreo launched himself into the fray—not to fight but to pull from harm's way items of value that the brawl was about to roll over. As he ran this way and that, he shouted exhortations to his patrons to remember who, what, and where they were and to stop acting like recalcitrant schoolchildren. He did not truly expect anyone to listen to him, which is well, since no one did.

The one thing that moved him to get into the fight itself was a movement he caught out of the corner of his eye from halfway across the room: the Thalacian had ducked under a table in an effort, he thought, to make a dive for his belongings. Fearful that the man was making a grab for a weapon, he dived in the Thalacian's direction, saw he would never make it, and screamed to Gus for help. But when the Thalacian emerged, he did nothing more aggressive than to hop onto one of the few tables that



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remained upright. In his hand, he brandished the last “weapon” Boreo had ever expected to see.

It was a lute, and oh, how sweetly he played it! A single arpeggio, and the proprietor felt his entire body still of its own accord. A second, and he felt his eyes turn toward the Thalacian in mute appeal that he play on—and on and on. A line of melody, and the brawling around him ground to a complete halt. All around him, patrons turned one by one to listen, enraptured, some frozen in the act of delivering a punch. When the Thalacian dived into his main theme, Boreo swore he heard the music Phino and his angels had made for the One on the Day of Creation.

When he looked around again, his customers were smiling happily up at the bard, and the bard was smiling as congenially back. Playing all the while, the stranger meandered toward the door, plucking as he went, and no one moved to stop him. Something at the back of Boreo’s mind told him he should be berating the younger man for inciting a riot, then trying to collect for the damage the brawl had caused, but a drowsy warmth had suffused his limbs. And, really, hadn’t he been high-spirited as a lad and done some unredressed damage somewhere along the way? Better to let the matter rest...

But wait—what was this? The Thalacian was giving him a benevolent nod, vamping on his open strings as he reached into the pocket of his braes, then drawing out a small pouch of gold and tossing it in his direction. Boreo acted just in time to catch it. Then he surrendered again to that golden warmth. The businessman in him remarked that the pouch of coin seemed heavy enough not only to pay for the damage but to build an entire new residential wing. What a fine lad this Thalacian was! How proud his mother and father must be of him that he would show such consideration to a stranger! If only his own children had grown up with such a sense of magnanimity...

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The bard, Deneth bent Elias by name and Lord Kinonde by birthright, breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the door that opened on the street. Continuing to vamp, he felt for the doorknob, then jumped when the entire door burst inward. He looked up, breathed a second sigh of relief when he saw that the intruders were his friends from the delegation. He jerked his head toward the street. He knew the spell he had cast with his music would wear off shortly after he stopped playing, and he didn’t want to be anywhere near the pub when it did. “Night, folks!” he called with a genial wave. They all waved back. A few even raised their glasses to him. He chuckled to himself.

Outside, one of his friends said, “Well, Deneth, when we learned we had lost you, then heard the sounds of a brawl, we knew just where to come looking.”

“Just having a little fun, Bradys, at the expense of a few hypocrites,” Deneth replied. He slung the lute across his back and turned up the street, ambling toward the palace at an easy pace. His comrades fell into step

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beside him.

“What did you do to provoke them?”

“Me? What makes you think it was *me*?”

“Deneth.”

His laugh was earthy. “Oh, I let the hypocrites play nice and ply me with the local brew and pump me for information. Thought I might goad them a bit just to see how long it would take them to show their true colors. To be honest, I’m getting sick of hearing about the men in the delegation making the politist of overtures to the ladies of the court only to get lectures about Carotian mysticism shoved down their throats. Our mate Jerem even got formally called out, and for what?” He grunted in disgust.

“So you were—what?—striking a blow on behalf of the flower of Thalacian manhood?” Bradys asked his friend in a tone of voice so dry it should have desiccated every major body of water on the planet.

“Not *for* the flower of Thalacian anything so much as *against* Carotian hypocrisy. Everywhere I turn, it seems like I run into Carotians who proclaim publicly the past is the past, then act in private like they still believe the great warrior race is out to even the score.”

“By dishonoring every specimen of Carotian womanhood it comes across. I know the drill.”

The third member of their party slapped Deneth on the back. “It’s good to know the honor of your house lives on in you, old son,” he laughed. “So what did you do that started that riot, ask if any of those fellows had daughters or sisters they wanted the score evened with?”

He grinned, an odd blend of the diffident and the wicked. “Well, not in so many words, Kort.”

“Well?”

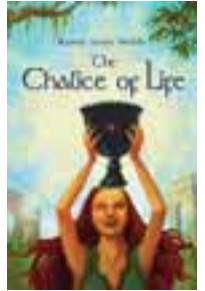
He cleared his throat. “I asked about the *tal-yosha*, about how their orders of spiritual kinship worked in practice, about tales I’d heard about exactly what it takes to bring a Carotian child to birth—that sort of thing.” He was keeping his tongue very firmly in his cheek during his recap of the conversation.

“In all innocence, of course.”

“Of course.”

Bradys emitted a snort that suggested just what he thought about Carotian mysticism. “The Carotians have a church-sanctioned relationship to cover every intimacy of body or mind sentientkind has ever dreamed up. The Erebiters are almost as bad. And, really, what does it all amount to? A social convenience dreamed up by the lawyers—or, here, more likely the priests—to pacify a people who need desperately to believe there are spiritual roots to what’s fundamentally an exercise in physical gratification.”

“My point exactly: how’s a Thalacian to make sense of it all? So I asked, and all they came back at me with was a long list of platitudes about consortium and marriage and their orders of spiritual kinship and all the rest being ‘matters of the spirit.’” He inflected the last four words as if mimicking a sage puffed up on his own conceits and gestured for effect. “Tsk. What they were leaving unsaid, I could hear as a dull roar.”



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“How’s a Thalacian to grasp anything at all about things of the spirit?”

“Exactly. Most of ‘em barely think we have souls as it is. So I said as how I supposed, if they couldn’t explain it any better than that—y’know, it being just among us men and all—I’d simply have to go out and get myself some first-hand experience.”

“And did you hint that you wanted to get this first-hand experience at the hands of any maiden in particular?”

Another earthy chuckle. “The young lady you feel so certain we were serenading. And I did a little more than hint.”

Two loud guffaws at that. “You’re lucky they didn’t just blast you to a cinder on the spot. They’ve a proprietary view of their royalty, these Carotians. Very protective.”

“Very different from the average Thalacian on the street,” Kort laughed, “who’d disown the entire Toth dynasty the way any other race would disown a bastard child.”

“It’s not only House Toth some of us want to disown,” Bradys shot back in a low growl. Then, to Deneth: “You think a member of any other race in the quadrant would have gotten *that* reaction using *those* tactics? Gods of hell! Who but a Thalacian would have gotten their backs up by hinting he wanted to explore the mysteries of this ‘spiritual kinship’ nonsense with their sisters and daughters? If you’d been a Crabman from Tincto, they’d have been wondering if any kids you had would come out speckled or parti-colored and betting on how many limbs it would have.”

“And if it would have pincers or fingers,” observed Kort.

“If you ask me, the idea of confederation is rot and so is this quest, no matter what their high-and-mightinesses all say. Give me no confederation at all and Thalac as a republic, and I’ll be a happier man for it.”

An alarmed Kort hushed him, but Deneth said, “Say it a little louder, Bradys, I think someone in the next star system might have missed it.”

“So? I’m not the only one who thinks it or says it. But it’s possible I’m one of the few actually doing something about it. Here, Deneth,” he went on, forcibly redirecting the conversation, “you’re cut up and bleeding. Let’s have a look at you.” He pulled Deneth into the pool of radiance cast by the nearest streetlight so he could get a better look at the gash his friend had taken across his back. Something on Deneth’s shoulder caught his eye. “Hey, what’s this? New scar?”

“What’s what?” Deneth craned his neck to look, focused, and then did a double take. “Nah, can’t be,” he murmured.

“Can’t be what?”

“It’s something you’d class as rot, old son, if rot is what you think this quest is.” He frowned, troubled.

Kort joined them and looked closely at the mark Bradys had indicated. “It’s what Gil was saying would mark those going on the quest for the lost prince,” he said in a hushed voice. “It’s the Stag of Minissa.” He looked at Deneth in wonder, as if he expected his friend to sprout wings, take up the harp, and turn into one of the seraphim that were said to serve the Pantheon. Beside him, Bradys looked more like he expected Deneth to sprout horns and take on the aspect of Ahriman himself.

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Deneth took in those two expressions so at variance with each other yet so akin in the way they suddenly set him apart from two men who had been his friends since bardic college. He wanted to shake them both, to slap them silly, to expunge those equally repugnant looks from their faces, to scream, “It’s *me*, you fools!” and “Quit staring!” In the end, instead of doing any of these things, he turned his eyes heavenward and pointed to the mark. “Hey! Hey, you up there! Is this a joke? You’ve gone and aimed this mark at someone you wanted, and I got in the way. Here, you don’t want me, not after what I’ve just said about your precious Carotians!” He kept his gaze up for a full minute as if he expected a reply. Getting none, he frowned and heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Bloody gods can’t do anything right,” he grumbled.

“Well, I’m stumped,” the priest on duty in the temple of Ereb in Ereb City said to his colleague. “You ever seen anything like this?” He drew the other man into the office that abutted the small ward in which their patient lay. The wards themselves were bright, airy, and spacious, the better to lift the patients’ spirits. The offices, meant chiefly to allow the priests to do paperwork or take a brief respite from their labors, were no less bright but tended to seem smaller than they were due to the accumulation of paperwork and tomes on various illnesses.

“Not that was refractory to treatment like this is,” the second priest said now. “Whyn’t they take him over to the temple of Thalybdenos? Their hospital is really better supplied, and they’re really our superiors as far as healing goes. I’m not ashamed to admit that.”

“Why would you be? We all have our sub-specialties. Not that an outworlder would know that. I think most that can tell us from the Carotians, even in the Independent Trading Worlds, just see an Erebite on the street and think ‘healer.’ This one knew a little more, or his Dad did—theirs is a warrior culture, and he wanted his son in the hands of the priests of a god of war rather than one who sanctifies healing or meditation or childbirth or any of the rest.”

“The Dad important, is he?”

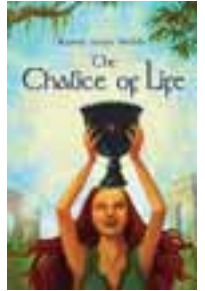
“An ambassador from one of the worlds on the fringes of the Dantonian Empire—one the High King and Queen would very much like to be sympathetic to us rather than to the Dantonians.”

The second priest sucked in his cheeks. “So we really, *really* want to make him all better, eh? As a gesture of good will? Think we’d be pushing our luck bringing in someone from the temple of Thalybdenos?”

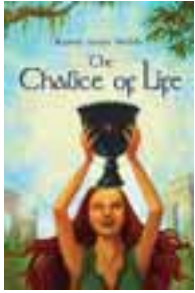
“I think so.” He grinned. “When I said the Dad didn’t want his son in the hands of the priests of any of those other gods, I was putting the most polite spin on it I could. I won’t use his exact words, but ‘milksop’ barely hints at the mildest of them.”

“Thinks we’re manly men over here, huh?”

“I guess he’s not the first to grasp only that our Ereb is a god of war and miss the ‘Justice’ and the ‘Righteous Cause’ bit.”



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“Hmm.” He frowned. “Well, I guess we could petition the boss for permission to bring in the King.”

“I’d do that in a heartbeat if I could be sure we’d completely exhausted our own resources.”

“You’re not sure?”

His brow knit briefly, then he nodded. “OK, I’m sure.”

“Wait a minute, though. Our resources aren’t just us old-timers. There are the lads and lasses just going out to start their own ministries.”

“I thought most of them left right after graduation.”

“Most did, but there are a few who were waiting for a small contingent of pilgrims to arrive. They’re all heading off to Jaffra later today; the newly-ordained priests and priestesses are going straight to their postings once they complete the pilgrimage rites.” His face brightened. “And you know who’s still around?”

“Who?”

“Did you ever have Torreb bent Eroch assigned to your service?”

Now the first priest’s face brightened. “Sure, I remember him! Best scholar I’ve seen come through here in all my days as a teacher—always looking for opportunities to study the rare and the strange, like it was his mission in life to cure every malady of every race in the galaxy. Some of the initiates, you have to beat the simplest techniques into them with a stick and threaten them with latrine duty to get them to come in from weapons practice and attend to their studies. Not Torreb: he’d have a technique mastered and be working on his own refinements of it while the rest were still getting the basic mindtouch down. Only initiate I’ve ever had ask me to load him up with extra work, was Torreb.”

The second priest chuckled. “I think he was out to prove the temple had invested wisely when it brought him in on a full scholarship. He went through the program so fast, sometimes I thought *we* should have been paying *him*. Twenty-five and he’s getting his first independent posting already. He’s a good lad.”

“He is. Except—” The first priest put a hand to his mouth and stifled a laugh.

“What?”

“Well, for all his brilliance, I have to admit sometimes his bedside manner left somewhat to be desired. He’d go charging in thrilled to death that he’d found a new disease to study and cure—”

“—and sometimes forget there was a patient on the other side of the rash or the broken bone or the magical wards or the whatever. I remember.”

“And with a problem on such a—well, on such a *delicate* area of the body...”

He considered a moment. “You have to admit, though, once his patients understood why he was asking questions of such a personal nature and saw that he had their best interests at heart, most of them responded to his sincerity.”

“Most—yes. Good thing he had his mace with him that one time, though.”

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“Ah, yes, his mace. Odd choice for a warrior-priest consecrated to Ereb.”

“Well, we all have to give up something, or adopt a limitation of some sort, when we’re close to ordination. His was never to fight with a weapon that spilled blood.”

He chortled. “Oh, sure, there’s no blood spilt when a mace crushes a bone!”

“Well, not shedding blood by slicing and dicing—you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, OK. Well, all right, then, let’s do this. If this fellow succumbs to the arms of Bronys and anyone finds out there’s something we didn’t try, all the pleading in the cosmos about how his soul was ready to make The Great Journey won’t save our jobs—or our hides!”

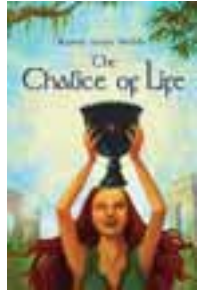
A short time later, Torreb bent Eroch was seating himself next to the bed of the young man in question. His face was youthful even for his 25 years; his robes, though new, hung on his lanky frame like hand-me-downs passed down too soon from an older and burlier brother. He spoke quietly to his patient, who, though he began to blush furiously and at times eyed Torreb as though he doubted the young priest’s sanity, answered his questions.

From across the room, the two older priests watched with interest as Torreb dived in with childlike enthusiasm. The outworlder answered at first in monosyllables. Two-word sentences came next, though it seemed to the two priests that the words escaped his lips only grudgingly. Both were reminded of deadfall being swept along a river swollen with snowmelt, then damming the water completely as the currents forced them into a stricture too narrow for the whole mass to pass at once. Three minutes of tension causing the words to stick in the patient’s throat, though, and it seemed like the back pressure of the water finally kicked the deadfall loose. The priests wondered if Torreb’s initial questions—certain to be embarrassing considering the nature of the man’s affliction—had put the patient off, that he finally had the sense (or sense of indignation) to sputter, “But what’s *that* got to do with anything?” after which Torreb explained himself in terms he could grasp. Once the man had satisfied himself that Torreb did not ask from prurient interest alone, once he saw the sense of where the young priest was going with his questions, he relaxed and became eager to help. A few minutes of this less forced sort of conversation, and Torreb was reaching for the contacts in the man’s temples and settling himself into the healing trance.

Not ten minutes later, he was rising and approaching them. He explained the exact nature of the problem and the steps he had just taken to initiate the healing process. He went on to suggest how they might conduct their further treatment of the young man, then took his leave of them with the quip that he was off to tend his own flock.

He speaks with such an affecting degree of humility! the first priest projected to the second as Torreb explicated his views.

Especially considering he’s just elucidated for us in a few minutes the nature of a problem that’s been defeating us the better part of two days!



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the second projected back.

A courteous young fellow and a great respecter of his elders is our Torreb.

And so conscious of the sensibilities of us old-timers!

Impressed with Torreb's comportment, they were even more impressed when, returning to their patient, they found him well on his way to recovery.

But a few hours later, when the group of pilgrims departed for Jaffra, Torreb was not with them. Instead, he was closeted not with the Chief Priest of the temple in which he had trained but with the High Priest of Ereb—the cleric who was head of the order for the entire planet.

That he had come to be here was not his own doing precisely. As he had changed into his traveling clothes after his visit with the young outworld patient, he had noticed a strange brown mark on his left shoulder—one that had certainly not been there when he had dressed that morning. His own incredulity had delayed his recognition of the Stag of Minissa; his reaction upon recognizing it had fallen somewhere between Mosaia's and Deneth's. *What???* was followed quickly by *Why???* and *What was Minissa thinking???* But being of a more reverent cut of cloth than Deneth and infinitely more familiar with the Carotian Pantheon than Mosaia, he had catalogued all three reactions as childish and arisen to do his duty.

A trip to his immediate superior had started him on his journey up the order's chain of command and, in a few short hours, landed him here. His head was still whirling from the speed at which he had been passed up the ranks and at the thought that the High Priest had made time for him on such short notice.

"Come in, Torreb, come in!" greeted the High Priest as he ushered the younger man into his office. Unlike the offices in the hospital area, this one was spacious; shelves carved of a rich, dark wood lined the walls and held enough healing tomes to fill a library.

"Thank you, my lord," he said with a diffident lowering of his eyes.

"I hear it's been quite a day for you," he went on, gesturing Torreb to a chair near his desk. "First your miraculous cure of the ambassador's son, and now this."

Torreb's eyes snapped up. "Ambassador's son?"

"Didn't you know? Ereb above, it would have caused a diplomatic incident with the poor fellow falling ill here if we hadn't been able to cure him! The Dantonians aren't the only warmongers in this part of the galaxy—they're merely the most aggressive. We sometimes forget there are others who would make trouble for us over something this frivolous. You've done a great service not only for your patient and your temple, but your entire world—your entire system, I should say. I hope someone's thought to thank you before this."

His eyes dropped again. "Well, the priests who asked my opinion, of

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course, and—well, a courier did come with a package from the young man's family."

"Something nice, I hope?"

"I don't know, I never opened it." He raked a hand through thick brown hair. "There was my packing to finish, and then the Stag appeared, and then there were the ethical considerations: I thought of just handing it over to the temple. It doesn't seem right to take a gift when I was just doing my job."

The High Priest laughed heartily. "You're a wonder, Torreb. I wish I had a hundred more like you. No, you keep it. And if a gift comes from King Thalon and Queen Naloth, or from the High King and Queen themselves, you keep that, too. Er— may I inquire into the nature of this ailment that so muddled two of my senior clerics?"

Eyes up again, and a light had come to them. Torreb may have been uncomfortable with talk of war and ambassadors and gifts, but here was something he could latch onto. "Well, my lord, the supreme irony would have been if their government had declared war on us if we'd failed to cure him. I don't often say this about a patient, but in a sense the poor chap brought it on himself."

"In what way?"

"Had word reached you of the symptoms he was experiencing?"

He frowned. "Something about a rash with rather bad lesions centered on—well, on..." Taking Torreb's innocence into account, he outlined an area that circumscribed his own hips and thighs. "The —er— generative organs?"

"Exactly. How can I put this? You know how some races conceive of Ereb as a god of war rather than a god of justice and war in a righteous cause? Because of our society's view of—well, of relations between the sexes, sometimes people misinterpret that, too. They hear our dictum about sharing the gift 'with wisdom' and sometimes interpret that as 'with complete abandon.'"

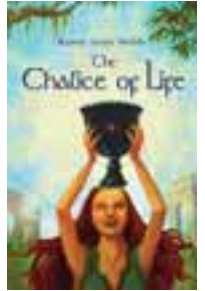
Not as innocent as all that, then, the High Priest mused. "I have seen diplomatic incidents arise from that particular misinterpretation," he chuckled. "I've also seen a number of outworlders turned into things small, green, and scaly for the affront—transiently, of course, and only by the Carotians. So one of our women cursed him with an illness?"

"That's the strange thing. It's really more like he cursed himself."

"But I thought in his society it was considered somewhat—well—to a man's credit to have a few outworld conquests."

"I think it generally is, sir, but he was following the dying wish of an honored aunt that he become a monk, and monks of the order he was planning to join are held by a vow of complete abstinence almost from the time they make their intentions known. I'm not sure I completely understood this part, but he said they believe their strength flows from complete purity of body and mind, as if purity and commerce with a woman, even a bondmate, were mutually exclusive quantities."

"In some cultures, the two are regarded that way. Their people are capable of practicing neither temperance nor discretion, so they embrace denial as their highest goal."



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Torreb looked like he wanted to ask if children in such societies were conceived in Petrie dishes but thought better of it when he remembered whom he was addressing. “Apparently—” Here he shrugged helplessly as if befuddled by the complexities of the universe. “—it’s their world’s most respected order and families pray and make sacrifices every day in hope one of their number will be accepted into it.”

“More even than they want them to be great generals?”

“Yes. It’s taken very seriously by the entire culture when a young man makes his intention known: if he were caught with a woman of his own race, he’d be barred from the order, but the woman would be publicly stoned.” His eyes widened in incredulity at what he was reporting to his superior.

The older man frowned thoughtfully. “Interesting take on gender equality. Go on.”

“Well, he had mixed emotions about joining: he would never dream of not granting his aunt’s dying wish, but he had been planning on making a career in their military. So what with one thing and another, I guess when he accompanied his father here, he saw Ereb as his last chance to experience that aspect of life he’d been forced to forswear before he was really ready.”

His eyes widened. “And he felt he’d found a woman who classed accommodating him as sharing the gift with wisdom?” He shook his head. “I must have a word with the High Priestess of Arayne about what they’re teaching our young folk in the adulthood training these days.”

Torreb looked like he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or gawk at the remark—not quite the comment he would have expected from the Chief Priest of his own order! He settled for a small grin, but his front teeth appeared almost immediately on his lower lip. “I won’t speak to the young lady’s motives, but I will say each of them could have been a bit better informed of the other’s culture before they made the decision to act. From what he describes, she had just been forced to break off a consortium because of the approach of the *tal-yosha*: she and her consort just weren’t ready to take the step into marriage and family yet. So she may have been hurting, or she may have been rebelling, or any of a thousand other things. Whatever the reason, she must just not have been thinking clearly.” He sighed and looked distant for a moment; his voice sank to a distant whisper that got more and more quiet as his vision turned inward. “They teach us that the mindscape is so vivid for our folk, that so much of the act of joining happens on a level that isn’t physical at all. Touching this young man’s mind brought me face to face with just *how* vivid it all is. I’d never before confronted how forcefully everything not of the body can reach out to another to seek reunion, or how profound that yearning of soul for soul can be for a woman in that condition. I think she expected he would understand, that he would be prepared and know how to guard himself. And he knew nothing at all.” He paused, sighed, raked a hand through his hair again; both eyes and voice returned to the present. “I guess the concept of joining being other than physical is not well developed in his culture. So when he felt her soul reach out to him and he had no idea how to respond,

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he heard a shriek of psychic anguish of such proportions that—Aryne above, my ears are still ringing with it!

“I don’t know how far along things went; I don’t know that it’s important. I just know that both of them were suddenly, *painfully* aware of how not-wise the thing they were doing was, and that he hurried away in an agony of guilt and shame and profound loss. The next morning, he awoke with the rash and clusters of these brittle, weeping sores. I guess he couldn’t quite bring himself to discuss it with his own people, or even with the good clerics who asked me to speak with him. And I guess because he was afraid the healing link would mean our clerics might wrest from his mind by force what he feared to voice aloud and freely, he resisted their best efforts: they couldn’t initiate the mindtouch securely enough to do him any good.”

“But you did?”

“I don’t think I did anything more than get him to quit fighting the mindtouch so I could work. There was really very little physical damage for me to assist his body to heal.”

“And the damage to his psyche? It must have been a profound insult that his body would react so.”

He emitted a small laugh of self-derision. “Well, I wish I were better at talking to people out loud. I’m sure my attempts to reassure him were clumsy at best. I know my initial attempts to draw him out had all the finesse of a herd of cattle stampeding through the city square on market day! But once we met in the mindscape and he saw my concern was genuine, and that I was also a young man with aspirations to the priesthood who had made many mistakes, his sense of mortification started to drain away. I don’t know if he’ll go to his father and say he’s just not cut out to be a monk or if he’ll just resolve to become the best monk he can, but I think this will be the last time he tries to find a loophole through his own society’s conventions by exploiting the conventions of another!”

The High Priest smiled at him. “I reckon so. You’re a good fellow, Torreb. I hate to lose you. But now it seems that not only our temple but our entire world must lose you!” He frowned in bemusement at the less than merry expression that came to Torreb’s face. Torreb’s was not the sort of face that bore deceit well: his efforts not to show his disappointment made him look twice as disheartened as he really felt. “You don’t seem pleased, my son. Surely you’re not upset at your election by sweet Minissa?”

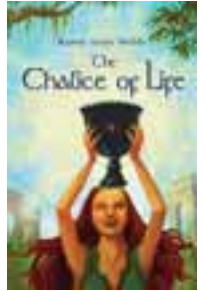
“Not upset exactly,” Torreb replied. “To say truth, I think I’m still in shock! I was all set to take off to Jaffra and then to assume my new duties as priest to my own flock. I’d been looking forward to it and planning for it for all these months!”

The High Priest smiled tolerantly. “We condition all things upon the will of the Pantheon, do we not? Evidently, Minissa had plans for you that she did not see fit to relay to Erebe! You are, you know, free to refuse.”

“Oh, no! I could never refuse with so clear a token. But...” He trailed off.

“Yes, my son?”

“Well, why me? I mean, I feel like I’m hardly more than—well, if I were



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a tradesman, I would say I felt like hardly more than an apprentice. Why not a senior cleric—a master, so to speak, or a journeyman, or at least someone in service to Minissa?”

He looked thoughtful. “He who serves one deity serves the Pantheon, and the people. As to your lack of experience—perhaps you were chosen just because you’re not settled in yet. There would be no child left fatherless, no wife left husbandless, no flock left shepherdless were you not to return.”

“The political life of Thalas and the Union—and the physical life of the entire system—are at stake! If my life is required that Prince Eliander might be found and returned to his people, I will go to the arms of Bronys gladly.”

This time the smile was fond: there was not and had never been any artifice about Torreb’s sincerity when it came to serving his god and his people. “The scholars who study these things say Minissa chooses her questing groups as an organic whole,” he mused. “She chooses each questor for his particular gifts, yet she also chooses so her questors’ individual gifts complement and reinforce one another. If they work together with diligence and care, the questors she chooses become those best able in the cosmos to achieve the task she gives them. And if you and her other nominees learn to work together with that same diligence and care, I think it entirely likely that you’ll all be coming back—neither unscathed nor unchanged, but alive.” He rested a hand lightly on Torreb’s shoulder. “My son, I was being glib just now when I said perhaps you were chosen in part because you have no strong attachments to a parish or to a wife and family. I don’t try to second-guess Ereb; how should I even try to second-guess Minissa?” He chuckled at his own vanity. “But never, ever think any of us look on you as no more than an apprentice or a journeyman. Your thirst for knowledge, your dedication to curing the incurable, your tenacity, your humble approach to your own prodigious gifts—it’s been an example to us all. I think your fellow questors will believe themselves lucky to be in the company of a priest who doesn’t stop looking for a way to alleviate suffering while there’s one more stone to overturn.”

“Even if he sometimes forgets there’s a man behind the malady?” he quipped.

The High Priest looked philosophical. “I’ll take a man—a *priest!*—who knows and acknowledges his weaknesses and works with them over one of greater skill who blunders blithely ahead in ignorance any day of the week.” He chuckled. “But, yes, Torreb, *do* do your best to remember your patients have both a psyche and sensibilities that need to be taken into account.”

“I will, sir.” He smiled, then went back to looking completely overwhelmed.

“I’ve arranged passage for you on a transport that leaves for Caros in the morning. You may have one last night with your family, if you wish.”

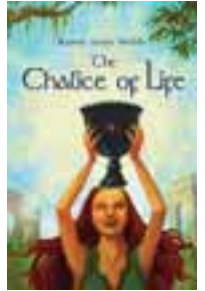
“Thank you, sir.”

He signed Torreb’s brow in blessing. “Gods-speed, my boy. Goodly souls from all over the Union will be praying for you and your success.”

Torreb held onto the sigh in his throat till the older priest had shut the door behind him. With what little he had gleaned about Eliander having

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been locked in a place outside of normal space and time, he thought privately that those “goodly souls from all over the Union” should be praying not for the questors their success but for a miracle.



In the woods not distant from Ereb City, yet another had been touched by the hand of Minissa. Her name was Alla. She was one of the curious, shape-shifting race that had inhabited Ereb long before the refugees from Thalybdenos had made their home here. The Erebiters called them simply “Forest-Dwellers,” *Aranyaka* in the ancient tongue of Thalybdenos. Where the Lemurians had integrated into the society formed on Caros by the refugees and thus ostensibly prospered, the Forest-Dwellers had kept apart, stayed true to their nature—and dwindled. They were solitary creatures, aloof and ageless; their interactions with the humans were most often limited to the more mischievous among them confusing unsuspecting Erebiters with their shape-shifting abilities. Their normal form was humanoid, perhaps some years to either side of middle age as the Erebiters would reckon appearances, but they could alter their bodies to appear to be any age at all, or to take on the forms of the woodland creatures among which they lived. This ability, they maintained, was unrelated to the use of the Art as the Carotians and Erebiters knew it; it gave them no power over any other living creature. It did, however, confer upon the Forest-Dwellers great understanding of the province of Minissa; from this understanding arose profound powers of healing and communion with the natural world.

Alla’s folk acknowledged the gods and goddesses of the Pantheon but did service, rather, to the Great Mystery, the All-Parent—the principle that compassed the primal forces of nature that drove the universe. No Erebite had ever tried to bend the Forest-Dwellers to his own theology. In truth, there was very little in *Aranyakan* belief that was openly at odds with it.

Dryads who said they were the servants of Minissa and naiads who said they served Thalys visited her from time to time; they intimated that her care of the woodland creatures who made their way to her cottage door had found favor in the eyes of their goddesses. When Alla heard such things, she would smile to herself and go on with what she was doing—mending a broken wing or poulticing a rheumy chest. She and her kind had looked after the wildlife of Ereb generations uncounted, long before they had ever heard of these new gods, and they would have continued on had the refugees never come.

Still, in these gentle spirits of wood and water, Alla knew she had found creatures who were not only friends and sisters but allies. Before they had begun to visit her, if she found a creature so badly wounded that she could not help it mend, she would keep solitary vigil, comforting it till it passed into the Great Beyond. Now, faced with a creature wounded beyond the point where her skill would heal it, she knew she could go into the forest and call on the wood spirits for aid. They would help her if they were able. If they were not, they would say simply that Minissa was calling her creature home, and then help Alla to ease the creature’s way into death.

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Later, they would sit and grieve with her, and later still, they might invite her to join them in the celebration of the great spiral dance of life.

Tonight, Alla had built a small fire in the clearing outside her cottage. On it, she sprinkled mineral salts so that the flames danced with all the colors of the woodlands. It was the summer solstice, the festival the Eremites named High Summer. She was prepared to observe it alone—the dancing flames and the great starry vault of heaven were company enough for her—but as she finished her meal of grain and vegetables from her garden, a fawn trotted into the clearing. It cocked its small head and gazed at her.

She smiled and held out her arms. “Come here, little brother,” she called in the voice no goodly beast had ever resisted. “Come here.” The fawn approached and laid its head in her lap. “What’s the matter, little friend?” she cooed. “Did you lose your mother? It’s all right. Well, you just stay right here with your sister Alla till your mother finds you; you’ll be safe with me.” She fetched some goat’s milk for the fawn and went so far as to bring some blankets so the two of them might stay in the clearing keeping warm till the fawn’s mother came along. Chanting quiet invocations to the Great Mystery, she fell asleep with the fawn nestled in the curve of her body.

She woke—or her spirit rose, she was never quite certain which—to the light of the full moon bathing the clearing. The fawn was nuzzling her neck. It kept right on nuzzling till she sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Then, when it was sure it had her attention, it scampered to the edge of the forest, where it began to grow.

And grow.

And grow.

Within a few moments, it had transformed itself into a mature stag. “Majestic” fell far short of describing it, as did “magnificent” and the few other superlatives upon which Alla’s addled brain could seize. She had seen stranger things under the great canopy of the forest in her long life, but not many.

She found herself wanting to speak, but she felt suddenly self-conscious under the weight of that solemn gaze. “Uh-huh,” was the best she could manage. She said it mainly to herself, and it came out as a long, drawn out “uuuuuuuuuuuuuh-huuuuuuuuuuuuuh,” as if her eyes were acknowledging the existence of a sight her brain could not accept. For a long moment, all she could do was stare.

With a toss of his mighty head, the stag approached her. He touched his antlers ever so gently to her left shoulder and breathed into her face a breath that was sweet and warm. It was written later in the annals of the quest that Alla became in the next instant one of only a handful of creatures who had ever heard the voice of the Stag of Minissa.

What he said was this: “Arise, my child. Arise and go to Caros, for I have need of you. There, in the enchanted wood of Tuhl the Sage, you will find what I have purposed for you.”

“Caros?” she gasped. “I’ve never been off-world in my life! I’ve hardly ever been as far as Ereb City!”

“The way will be made easy for you, my dear. Long has my mistress

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watched you. You have found—”

”Favor in her sight, I know. The dryads tell me that all the time. If she really expects me to believe it, why doesn’t she come herself and tell me?”

His response was placid. “The deities I serve show themselves when there is a need—where faith grows cold, when righteousness wanes. You have always served with a simple, honest faith in the beauty and order of things, a faith that is deeper and more true than that shown by the highest of her clerics. It does not matter that you do not worship her in name—you worship her in spirit and in service.”

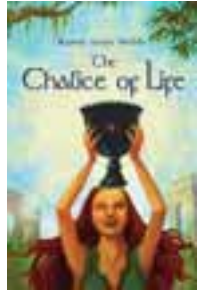
”Oh.” She looked abashed at the pride that had colored her words. “Caros?” she asked in a small voice. Worldly she was in many ways, but her universe had never extended much beyond this clearing and the section of wood in which it lay.

”Caros, and much farther. But you will have companions, good ones and true. You go to seek the lost prince of Thalas, Eliander, who was magicked to a far away place many centuries ago. Minissa sends you to seek him that the Union may live.”

”I see,” she said, wondering how clear it was to the beast that she didn’t. “But how do I start? And—oh!—mayn’t I see her just once? It’s so many years the dryads have been telling me about her, and I know the Great Mystery is nothing mortal mind was meant to comprehend, but if the Pantheon is really the way She speaks to us in a way we can understand, is it so wrong to want to—?” She broke off and stood looking imploringly at him. She was a little out of breath: she rarely said two sentences together and had never babbled like this in all the centuries of her life.

He flashed her an understanding cervine smile, then bowed his great head and closed his eyes as if he were communing. Suddenly, a voice kindly as summer came from the air around them. “Yes, child,” it said. “Perhaps it is time you and I met face to face.”

Before the change in timbre of the voice registered, Alla was ready to take exception to anyone with such a youthful voice calling her “child.” When it *did* register—the Stag’s voice had definitely been masculine, while this new voice was as clearly the voice of a woman—her eyes widened. The next moment, she was dropping to her knees in a spontaneous show of reverence; the next second, she had prostrated herself completely. The Stag had vanished into the mists at the edge of the clearing, but before her stood Minissa herself. It could only have been Minissa! The dryads had described for her on many occasions the way Minissa adopted human form when she came among them and the appearance that form took: a tall, radiantly beautiful woman garbed in white and crowned with spring flowers. Her eyes were the green of the finest emeralds; the hair that cascaded past her waist was that auburn so dark it appears brown until the light catches it and it turns to a river of molten gold. Had Alla been struck blind the moment before Minissa materialized, still she would have known in whose presence she stood. Before that Presence went grandeur; in its wake followed peace; from the air around it fell the sweet savors of holiness. And within it—within it lay a radiance so bright and pure and beautiful it could have illumined the heart of a dark star. The Forest-Dwellers were by their very



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nature a construct of that one Light that illumines all, and Alla was far from being the least of her people, but even she trembled as the impact of the raw power that had entered her domain beat upon her brow.

Alla was on the point of wondering why in Creation she had done such a foolish thing as to beg—no, to demand!—that she be granted converse with a living deity when a voice sweeter than the warbling of nightingales touched her mind. She felt her fears melt away like mist in morning sunlight. The goddess approached, raised Alla up, and proceeded to treat the *Aranyaka* not as a supplicant but as an honored guest brought to her celestial garden in that Home of Homes. Chief in Alla's mind ever after stood images of the goddess embracing her as a mother would a favored daughter, of her kissing Alla's brow and even serving Alla tea with her own hand.

And they talked. Oh, how they talked! They spoke of the ways of the forest, of the genesis of every living plant and creature, of the secret lives of trees, of the mysteries that lie hidden at the heart of the tiniest bud of leaf and flower. They spoke of the ways of the cosmos, of the genesis of the great celestial luminaries, of the secret lives of stars, of the mysteries that lie concealed at the heart of the greatest sun. And though Alla eventually dared look Minissa in the face and they spoke till the sky became rosy with the promise of dawn, a single image remained in Alla's memory forever after: a pair of eyes in whose sparkling depths lay the answers to every question sentientkind had posed an obdurate universe since the dawn of time.

The next morning she awoke, unsure if it had been a dream or a vision till she found in her hand a flower from the Immortal Realm and upon her shoulder the mark of the Stag.

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Deneth, after swearing his comrades to silence, returned to his rooms in the palace and went to bed. He was fervently hoping that the appearance of the Stag on his shoulder had been a hallucination induced by his having downed one too many drafts of Carotian ale and that a good night's sleep would cure him of his malady. A fluke of metabolism allowed the Carotians to consume huge quantities of spirits without getting more than a little sociable. It took a good ten ounces of absolute ethanol an hour to get a Carotian drunk and keep him that way; therefore, the spirits they usually imbibed in the pursuit of drunken euphoria were in a different league altogether than those served on other human worlds.

Sure, he thought, that's it. The brew they plied me with last night's made me hallucinate. And they have the nerve to pass that stuff off as ale on unsuspecting outworlders!

He slept well, and, in the morning, the Stag was still there.

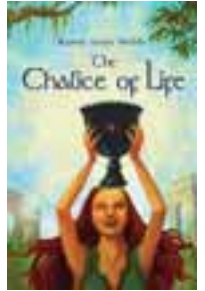
He swore.

Deneth did not think of himself as a religious man. The gods were out there somewhere, he assumed, and there they could stay for all the connection they seemed to him to have with his day-to-day life. He never prayed (it never struck him that his music might be categorized as such),

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but he occasionally chatted. He tried that tactic now, saying, "Look, folks, I know you meant this thing for someone else. I don't mind if it's a mistake. I don't mind if it's a joke. But you've had your fun now, and I'm sure you want to get down to giving it to whomever you really meant it for. Now, I know these things take time, so I'll wait till—say, tomorrow morning. It's not that I don't want to go, or that I wouldn't go if I really believed it was me you wanted—like I'm not afraid or anything, see? It's just that—well, if I'm the best you can do for a holy quest, the Union's in a whole lot more trouble than I thought."

But, next morning, the Stag was still there. It was, if anything, more well defined. As he glared at it in the mirror, he even fancied he saw it flash him a self-satisfied grin. He directed a second glare upward, in the direction in which he supposed lay the Home of Homes. Then he stormed off down the hall to seek an audience with the High King and Queen.



A third race shared Caros with the Lemurians and the Carotians: the Tigroids, a race of huge, intelligent cats. When the High Queen had been a spirited, teen-aged princess, her actions had brought about a lasting peace between the Tigroids and the humans on the planet. Minissa herself had then appeared to several of the high-ranking Tigroid nobles and ordered them to revise their strict caste system, and many of them had begun to worship her openly in the years that followed. Their clerics had said (and some who had seen Minissa concurred) that the lone goddess they had previously worshiped was merely Minissa in feline form, a form with which their folk could identify.

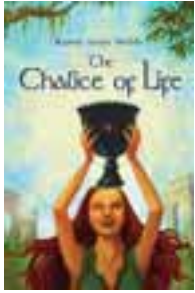
So it was that Prince T'Cru, whose father and grandfather had made peace with the Carotians, woke one morning from a strange, half-remembered dream to feel a burning sensation on his left flank. When he maneuvered into a position from which he could see the area, he thought he could make out the silhouette of a stag, a creature known to be beloved of Minissa. Straightaway, without consulting either his father the King or his counselors, he went to the clearing in the nearby wood that served as an open-air cathedral to seek the advice of his priest.

The two bowed to each other in the elongated stretch that, among their folk, constituted a display of respect of the highest order. "Your highness is up and about early today," remarked R'Nar the priest. His tail twitched expectantly.

"Yes, my lord priest," replied T'Cru. Even the nobility were courteous to the clergy, and T'Cru had been reverent even as a cub. "Come and take a look at what brings me here." He indicated the mark, which had appeared as a white patch marring the pure black of his coat.

R'Nar arched his whiskers in surprise. He had never heard of a splotch of white tainting the coat of one of such pure royal blood. "It's white!" he exclaimed, and took the liberty of swatting at it with one paw in an effort to eradicate it. The act reflected his distress: in his world, only menials had prehensile forepaws. A member of the upper castes did little with his

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forepaws that did not involve rending flesh.

"Stop it!" T'Cru ordered, no longer so polite. "White?" he hissed a second later. He put his head between his paws. "Disgrace!" he sighed. "What have I done to bring such dishonor on my family?"

What might have been a frown crossed the priest's face as he reconsidered the mark. He found he had to visualize it in sable before he could make of it anything but a blemish. "I see why you came to me, Prince T'Cru. This mark has the form of—well, I think the Carotian clerics call it the Stag of Minissa. You are marked for a great task by the goddess herself."

"She blesses me with one hand and curses me with the other!"

"Tsk, tsk. Do not forget it was Minissa herself who ordered us to change our ways."

"Then she has little regard for what we cherish!"

He considered. "Perhaps we cherish the wrong things," he said in contradiction of his actions a moment ago. "Why, do you realize that, when your grandfather was king, a commoner could be executed for drinking from the same body of water a member of the nobility had just used? We weren't even sure back then that commoners were people in the proper sense—you know, souls and intellect and all. Maybe this -er-?"

"Blemish?"

"No," he reassured the Prince a little too quickly. "Mark. Yes, that's it—*mark*, and a sacred one at that. It may be that," he added in a well-intentioned effort to placate his young friend, "not only is it a sign for you, but a warning for us all."

T'Cru grunted. "Next you'll have it that the warrior class should be permitted to marry into the low nobility and be wondering what pretty patterns such a match will produce among their offspring. Two generations of that, and we'll all end up with stripes and spots!"

The priest began to say, "Minissa forbid!" but a thunderclap emanating from a cloudless sky cut off the remark. He looked contrite. "The -um- signs have portended a great happening, recently. Stars. Disturbances in the elements. Animal migration patterns."

"Does it all spell out what I'm to do?"

"No. But I have ways. Wait here a moment." He went to the open bole of a nearby tree and nosed out a crystal that shone in the morning light. He rolled it across the clearing till it sat between him and T'Cru, then bent over it and incanted. Soon, a rosy glow appeared at the heart of the crystal. A moment later, a tiny image of the Chief Priestess of Minissa materialized.

"We are pleased to welcome our honored brother to the sacred precincts of Minissa," she greeted when she recognized R'Nar.

R'Nar returned the formal greeting, and then indicated T'Cru. "Turn so she can see the Stag," he instructed. To the Priestess, he said, "The hand of Minissa has evidently visited us. Can you advise the Prince?"

She squinted at T'Cru, then nodded. "Yes. Even through the crystal, I can feel the emanations of its power." She looked around as though someone might be listening. "I can only say so much using the crystal now. You know the enchanted wood of Tuhl the Sage?"

"Yes."

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“Prince T’Cru must go there. There, all will be explained.” Abruptly, the crystal went dark.

“Odd. She can usually talk the wings off one of Minissa’s Unicorns. Well, T’Cru?”

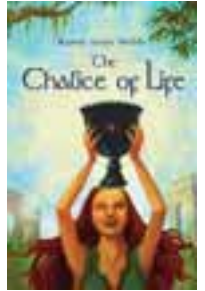
“I know the way.”

“Shall we call your retainers?”

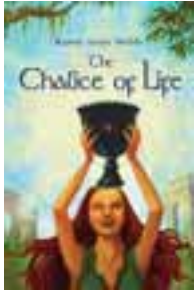
“No. No one else must see me like this. That way, if I do not return, no one will know. My father will not be shamed.”

“Well, what if you *do* come back? The mark may not disappear.”

“Then it will be a symbol of victory, and the shame will be balanced with honor.” And off he bounded.



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CHAPTER 3



ARRIVALS AND LABORS

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“You yourself must make an effort. The Pantheon and Kanami can but show the way. The meditative one who walks this path is released from the bonds of self.”

—The Book of Wisdom, speaking of the path to the One

FROM THE JOURNAL OF MISTRA OF CAROS:

“Heroes,” I mused to Tuhl tonight. “What’s happened to all the heroes? And where in the name of Erebus are they when you need them?” No, I didn’t muse it—I flung it. And he gave me a look that would have lulled an erupting volcano into quiescence. Normally, it would have lulled me. But tonight, after four weeks alone in this place of tranquility and ease, the pain and anger and frustration have begun to conquer me. The quiet of the wood, I see now, has been not tranquility but the silence of a heart gone numb with grief. Tonight the forest is alive with sound, as my heart is alive, but not with the joy of having been claimed by Minissa. It is the roar of emptiness I hear, as if my wound has reopened and redoubled in size to spill forth the last drop of my heart’s blood. Tonight the roar is so loud I think I would do myself any hurt just to be rid of it for a few moments.

It is so with injuries of the body, I suppose. A limb nearly severed will barely hurt in those first hours after the wound is inflicted, as if the pain, once perceived, would be so great its victim could not bear it and live.

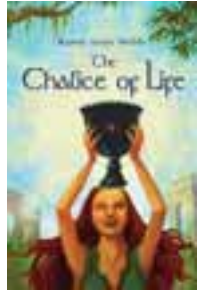
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KAREN ANNE WEBB

Only later, when the victim is past all hope of dying, can he perceive it in all the keenness of its agony. Only later can he wish for the swift death that would release him from it forever.

Where are the others? Why did Minissa choose me first instead of last? Where are the heroes who would have gone in my stead and made my election unnecessary...



Mistra—child and sibling of monarchs, as gifted in the arts as in sciences, as remarkable with *the Art* as she was with the Disciplines, as wise in the application of the Ethic as she was canny in the use of her intellect—did not let grief take her often. When she did give in to it, she bounced back with remarkable speed. Tuhl would have said she had put her time in his wood to excellent use, puttering in library and hidden laboratory, availing herself of music and song and play at arms and the company of the creatures of wood and stream. A month had passed before she made the remark about heroes; for a month he watched and waited and judged it best not to intervene. Thrice he heard her awaken in the night crying out that the rockslide that had claimed only the replicant had, in fact, claimed her, but on none of the following mornings had she looked ready either to accept release from Minissa (or, worse, Bronys), or solace from himself. In fact, never did she appear less than grimly determined to go on. But when senses other than sight finally told him the tattered ends of her body and soul had begun to unravel, when he saw no sign of any questor turning up to offer her companionship and an outlet for her keen faculties, he knew he must at last take a hand. What, he was forced to ask himself, was the one thing for which she lived and breathed that was lacking here? Watching her hack and slash the ersatz life out of a phantom opponent in his weapons room the next morning, he had his answer.

He was well rewarded for his afternoon of tinkering when he saw tears of gratitude in her eyes. For many years, dance had consumed her. Here in his wood, she could easily have devised her own accompaniments or sectioned off a room in the caverns in which he dwelt to devote to it. But he was wise enough to know that there are certain things so dear to the human heart that they cannot be made by one for one's own use but can only be accepted as a gift from a faithful friend. And friend Tuhl was, though one of short acquaintance.

He devised for her three things: a sprung floor set amid the woodlands, a data solid that would play back her favorite pieces of music, and, most importantly, a revision of the phantom opponent—a sort of phantom partner that would glean from her mind what it needed to support her in her double work.

He was pleased to see that her sighs when she finally came in that night were those not of distress but of cheerful exhaustion.

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The day after Mistra had posed the question to Tuhl about heroes was the day she had given up searching the skies for signs of the companions Minissa was choosing for her. She was too busy ruminating on his response to her outburst. "Heroes only exist in retrospect," he had mused. He would only elaborate to the extent of saying that no true hero set foot on the path of life with heroism as his goal, and no true hero realized he was becoming a hero even while he was making his greatest strides in that direction.

Pondering his little quip had led her to more fruitful paths of reflection. She could neither abjure the emptiness nor disown it, but she came at last to believe she could embrace it. Wasn't the right sort of emptiness what sages had striven for fruitlessly on countless worlds, what the wise had thirsted for in vain for millennia? She would enter that vale of emptiness, she decided, though pain be her steed and self-denial her mantle. She would flush from her very veins every attachment to the material world, the better to become the perfect vessel for Minissa's grace. *And for this great work, she said to herself, Minissa certainly needs a better vessel than I when I am so full of my own self.*

She had not been able to complain for want of companionship since Tuhl had devised his woodland studio for her. Attracted by her efforts and the beauty of the music, woodsylphs and other elfin dwellers of the forest had begun to turn out in droves to watch, to applaud or seek instruction. They had repaid her in their fashion. She now had in her possession raiment woven of moonbeams and several coronals of flowers that would never perish. She accepted this unlooked-for companionship graciously, as she accepted the company of her fellow questors when they began to appear a short time later. It was not till she had embarked upon the quest, however, that she made the connection between that final gesture of acquiescence to her fate and the sudden end of her period of enforced isolation.

On the morning she would later remember as the one that marked the change in her fortunes, she had banished every last sylph and sprite so she could concentrate on a piece of her own devising: a small *pas seul* based on a Terran melody so beautiful she felt her heart wrench in her breast each time she heard it. So intent was she on her work that she would have missed the clamor of a mechanical transport delivering her quest-mates to the wood. Not surprising, then, that she missed the stigmata of their true means of transport—the tiny splash in the Ether, the beat of wings as soft and white as those of a swan but ten times their size—as a pair of Minissa's unicorns touched down in a clearing not far from the spot where she worked.

Later, as she learned more of him, she would ascribe her complete insensibility to her visitor's approach to many things: his woodcraft, his kinship with the land that bade the trees lift their branches to admit him, that caused the creatures of field and stream react to a stranger with acceptance rather than alarm. And to the most compelling reason of all:

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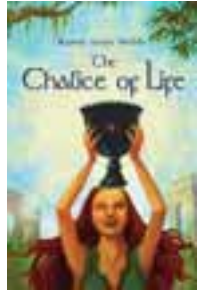
absorption in her craft. In fact, absorption was too poor a word for the way she threw herself into her work when she danced. When the rapture took her, two things and two things only existed in the entire cosmos: the music and the movement. Her mind took in the music, and her body responded. There was no room for anything else. It was as if her body became a living vessel filled with a shining fluid whose radiance was almost too pure and bright to bear.

For now, all she understood was that suddenly a living art was joining itself to the static one of the data solid. *A lute*, she thought. Somewhere between one turn and the next, she caught sight of the newcomer out of the corner of one eye. *Male*, she thought. *Why aren't I taking exception to this when I chased all the sylphs away so I could work on this alone?* came next. That thought was quickly obliterated by one that said this was the music she had always envisioned Phino making for the One on the Day of Creation. If this stranger were not an avatar of the god, still Phino's skill must somehow permeate his entire being—and what performing artist in his right mind could take offense at that?

The newcomer did not inactivate the data solid but rather embellished the music pouring from it. Something in those embellishments gave her the sense that she had an entire orchestra (as well as several of Phino's seraphic choirs) creating the music just for her in the very moment she conceived her steps. He began by doing no more than following the melody but shortly leapt in with little frills of his own—a mordent here, a bit of tremolo there. She had had astute conductors give her this sense of drama, but not often. In fewer than sixteen measures, he had adapted his accompaniment not to the data solid's music, but to her movement. When she needed the semblance of a *ritard*, it was there. When her movement dictated a sense of euphoric grandeur, his music swelled to glorious crescendo. Thirty-two measures into the collaboration, she would have said she had experienced few nights onstage before a packed house that equaled in excitement this impromptu woodland performance bereft of audience; sixty-four, and she would have said she had experienced few moments at close quarters with her consorts that had equaled the sense of exaltation she was creating with this stranger standing meters away. *His music and my movement*, she mused. *It's as if each exists only to give life to the other.* Even as she moved into a little apotheosis, she had the sense that the two were blending in joyous abandon like living beings to create something far more vital than either would ever be alone.

The piece finished, but he did not. He added on a few more ornaments that were an unveiled attempt to show off his skill, but one of such complexity that she listened in amused appreciation rather than with a sense of affront. *All right*, she thought, *two can play at this game.* A quick preparation, and up she went into turn. She contented herself with a clean four revolutions, then landed with the sort of security that suggested any perceived movement on her part in the last few seconds had been illusion.

The last chord faded; their eyes met. The newcomer was eyeing her with approval, but this was her first chance to take a good long look at him. She had to admit to a sudden feeling that her steed of pain was faltering



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while her mantle of denial, if it hadn't yet slipped completely from her shoulders, was sitting at a truly rakish angle. Neither of them moved. It was as if both felt they had, together, woven a spell that a single misplaced movement would unravel, and their only safety lay in stillness.

A beat before the moment became awkward, the newcomer's eyes suddenly fastened on something on her left shoulder. His eyes lit. In a flurry of activity, he put the lute aside and set about loosening the laces that fastened his shirt and tunic. She arched an eyebrow: if this were a proposition, it was the most precipitous she had ever received! He did not, however, continue to undress. He settled for pulling leather and fabric aside so he bared his left shoulder—and the Stag of Minissa. Belatedly, she realized that her own garment, one of the gossamer and starlight confections the woodsylphs had presented to her, left both shoulders bare. She brightened, righted herself, waltzed over and took his hands in hers. "You've come at last," she greeted, drinking in the sight of him, now less smitten by his earthy good looks than by the fact that here before her finally stood another of Minissa's Chosen. "That was superb. If you are not held in high esteem at home for your craft, the people around you are fools."

He grinned. "Your people have called mine that and worse for less offense than to write off the music of a bard, but I think I shall have no quarrel with you. Deneth bent Elias of Thalass at your service." He bowed, all grace and charm.

"Mistra bas Carthanas of Caros at yours." She said it without fanfare. If this, her first companion, did not know she was a member of the royal family of Caros, she was not about to belabor the point.

"You're -uh- I mean—But I *know* you. I mean, I've seen you dance. You were glorious. You *are* glorious."

She narrowed her eyes at him, not to disparage his praise for the line it would be coming from some, but to search for something in his face. "And *I* know *you*," she said, feeling there was something on the edge of memory she could bring into focus if only she concentrated hard enough. "I mean, I've heard you in concert, and that, too, was glorious. But it's more than that. I wish I knew why. It's like your music is somehow already a part of me." Seeing the way the remark seemed to leave him a little nonplused, she continued, "That's the way most of my preparation for the quest has been, though, I'm afraid: every few minutes I'm snatching at something that I can only remember the way one remembers a fragment of an elusive, half-forgotten dream. I think such a strange period of training must have scrambled my brain."

"It certainly hasn't affected your art!" he said, regrouping. "I thought you must be a dryad or a sylph, you were so lovely. If you'd been just a shade more translucent in the rising sun..." The smile that seemed programmed to beguile nevertheless held unfeigned appreciation. "Not that you're any less lovely now you've stopped dancing."

Her own smile was gracious. "It's the dress, I expect. One of the woodsylphs left it for me. It's made of spider webs and silk threads and sunbeams and so on." She whirled so the skirt flared. "You should see it in the moonlight."

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“Oh, I’d like to.” He realized a beat too late that it had come out too eagerly and in just the wrong way. He immediately made a face at the blunder, but she laughed it off.

“Let me show you where Tuhl lives—the place that’ll be home for you till the rest arrive and we get going.” She took his hand—no more than a gesture of camaraderie, yet a tingling like electrical current passed between them. The two of them sensed it the way animals will sense the growing turbulence in the atmosphere before a storm. With symmetry so perfect it might have been choreographed, they looked at their clasped hands as if their hands were a tangle of defective wiring, then looked up so their eyes met. Each saw the question “Did you...?” in the other’s eyes as their grip faltered; each watched as the other shook his head fractionally to indicate the effect had not involved a conscious use of the Art. An instant later, they were laughing about it as old school friends will laugh at a joke only the two of them have a hope of understanding. They clasped hands again and resumed their march toward the caverns.

“Looks like Tuhl’s found a friend,” Mistra commented as they approached the cave opening. And, indeed, Tuhl was enduring the solemn scrutiny of a second Lemurian, a young female of about the same height. They made a strange picture with their contrasts of youth and age, woodland-striped fur and bare flesh, leathers and flowing robes, but there was in the way they studied each other a remarkable similarity of manner.

“That’s Habadiah—*Habie*, I guess she likes. We came together. Flying above the treetops on one of Minissa’s Unicorn’s is quite an experience!”

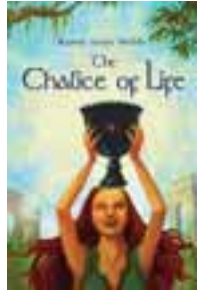
“And quite a privilege. I’m glad to see my patroness is treating her Chosen with the style befitting the task she’s set them.”

“We meant to come straight to the caves together, but when I heard the music and saw you dancing...” He shrugged.

“Spoken like a true bard,” she laughed appreciatively. “Will you play for me again?”

He nodded vigorously at her implied praise. Mistra was forced to grin at the gymnastic display his facial features put on that said he was forcing himself not to interpret the innocent comment as an invitation to do far more than collaborate as dancer and musician. She wondered briefly that such a simple statement had caused him such perplexity. If a lifetime of conditioning on Thalac had provoked the reaction he had been forced to suppress, maybe the stereotype of Thalacian women as vamps bent on seduction was more than just bad press!

“Deneth!” Habie greeted as her new friend came strolling out of the wood in the company of a female whose race she had a little trouble defining. She had the Queen’s loveliness, although her coloring was far more striking. However, she thought the Elders and priests might have said she looked like one touched by the Spirit World. Either that or she was an unusually sturdy wood sprite. It was enough to make her stop in her deliberations over what Tuhl might be (and if she liked him, and whether



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he was safe to trust). She waved, then went bounding over. Deneth delighted her by picking her up, swinging her around, and then hoisting her onto his shoulder.

“Hello, Habadiah,” Mistra said formally. She offered her hand.

Habie looked at it uncertainly, as if she were afraid it might bite or dissolve into the mists if she tried to grasp it.

“Don’t embarrass me, *kuchika*,” Deneth clucked. “Say hello and shake her hand, or kiss it if you want. She is a princess—the High Queen’s own sister.”

“Oh. OK.” She shook Mistra’s hand once, guardedly, then warmed to the gesture as the woman neither bit nor turned to vapor. “I guess you guys are all right.”

Mistra arched an eyebrow. “Gee, thanks.”

“Sorry,” said Habie, thawing a little more at the way Mistra’s ironic tone matched the one Deneth often favored. “Your sister’s one of the best of the bunch, and that’s a pretty good bunch you have at your palace. I mean, there were *Lemurians* there who didn’t turn up their noses at the sight of me.”

Mistra cocked her head. Habie felt a hesitant reaching toward her mind; she dropped her defenses just enough to permit the superficial scan when she got from Mistra only a sense of compassionate curiosity about that last remark. “You are an orphan,” said the Princess, and Habie was surprised to hear tears in the other woman’s voice.

Her lips twisted into a wry grin. “Well, orphan is the most polite thing I’ve heard it called. No one knows who my parents were, but I’m sure my mother wasn’t married. I’ve been shuttled around a lot at home.” She had opened her heart to Deneth about having been completely disowned, but she wasn’t quite ready to go into such detail with Mistra and Tuhl. She wanted to—in fact, every empathic sense she could bring to bear told her that here were people she could trust with the life of her soul as well as her body—but it was just too big a leap. “This one sweet little matron—she was a Lemurian, one of your mom’s personal attendants—told me that they would all be looking for other work real fast if they didn’t learn to see all with what she called ‘godlike eyes.’ When I asked just exactly what she meant by that, she said she meant you look at a person’s insides instead of his outsides, and that it’s by their insides that you judge them. She was the first person who ever asked me how my parents’ living arrangement was my fault.”

Mistra smiled. “My father was always careful to be sure he was disliking someone for his character rather than his race—when he disliked anyone at all. In fact, I think the Tigroids and Lemurians and outworlders get more consideration from him than the Carotians do.”

“Anyway, your sister and brother-in-law found me. She says Minissa spoke to her about me.” She brightened. “I was looting a fabric stall in the market.”

The smile turned crooked. “Uh-oh. I guess I’d better go and enchant my valuables to holler if you come near them.”

“Ah, that’s OK. I was only stealing to get money to eat.”

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“Right. Good safety tip: feed Habie and your valuables stay safe. Seriously, though if you want to brush up your skills or learn some new ones despite having a full belly, you came to the right place. Tuhl knows everything.”

“*Everything?*” Her eyes widened in a way that showed not skepticism but an imagination well and truly kindled.

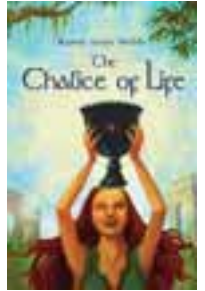
“Well, he knows more about the Art than we do, more about the Disciplines than the Eremites, more about woodcraft than either the Tigroids or the *Aranyaka*, more than —” She glanced sideways at Deneth. “Well, he probably knows more about something the Thalacians do well than they do.”

“What, Deneth?” She clapped her hands joyfully. “Tell, tell!”

“Oh, assassinations, I shouldn’t wonder,” he said drily.

“And brawling,” she guffawed, but she almost fell off Deneth’s shoulder at the look Tuhl gave her, his face was so solemn. “Hey.” She tapped Deneth’s head. “Down.” When she was face to face with Tuhl, she said, “I guess I’m a little rough around the edges, huh?”

Tuhl regarded her briefly, then smiled. “All most magnificent gems start like that.” Then, in a gesture that took them all by surprise, he took her hands and began to dance her merrily around the clearing.



The Chief Priestess of Minissa stared deeply into the crystal. Across from her, still as a statue except for an occasional twitch of his tail, sat T’Cru. Concerned for his friend’s safety after the abrupt way her transmission had been severed, he had sought her out before proceeding on to Tuhl’s wood. He, too, peered into the crystal, but he could see nothing but blackness.

After a long interval of silence, the Priestess spoke, although she kept her gaze riveted to the crystal. “I can’t get a clear image,” she murmured, shaking her head. “Just a sense of pervasive evil. It almost clears, till I can see a shadowy figure, more or less humanoid. Then, just as I get it focused, it fades.” She peered up at him. “You have been touched by the hand of the goddess. You look.”

His whiskers arched in surprise. “Lady, I have no gifts—”

“In this, your powers may be greater than mine. Look.”

With a feline shrug, he placed his forepaws on either side of the crystal. The Priestess’ private chamber was hushed, as if the universe were holding its breath in anticipation. T’Cru leaned down till his nose was almost touching the crystal. Gradually, the dull blackness became reflective blackness. Pinpoints of light appeared, stars in a sky far different from the one he knew. He felt himself being drawn inward and inward, falling, falling toward the stars...

The crystal filled with light so abruptly it might have been exploding. The shock actually threw him back, stunned.

“Oh, my gods!” cried the Priestess. She rang the gong that would summon her attendants. “Get the Chief Priest of Thalybdenos!” she

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ordered, not confident in her own ability to deal with a wounded Tigroid without the help of a cleric who served the god of healing.

T'Cru blinked. "No," he hissed. "I think I'm all right." He righted himself, blinked a few more times, and stretched. "Yes. Just shocked, I think. What was it?"

"I don't know. What did you see?"

"Stars. Lots of stars." He frowned and shook his head to clear it. "Then, almost at the same time as the flash, a palace. Not like yours, not—grrrr—flowing and graceful and—what's your phrase in Common?—in harmony with nature. It was black and craggy and twisted. It was convulsed, like someone dying from the taste of the makra root. Do you know the place?"

"No." Her brow furrowed. "But there are certain glyphs of warding so powerful that they can turn away an eye seeking to probe them even through a crystal ball. The most powerful ones could even cause a sketch or a trimensional to blow up." She shook her head. "I fear for your safety, my lord—for yours and that of all of your party."

A growl began deep in his throat. "Let it not be said that the fear of death ever kept a Tigroid prince from fulfilling his duty! But what is it I saw? Is it a stop on the way? Is it the fortress of someone who wants to see us fail?"

"I wish I knew. You must go on to meet Tuhl. Perhaps he, in his ancient wisdom, will have the answers."

Mosaia slipped off the winged unicorn's back and patted the beast affectionately. "Many thanks, friend Mar."

"Never a bother where the needs of Minissa are concerned," the unicorn replied. "Safe quest to you!" He tossed his head and sprang into the air. Soon he was joined by two of his comrades, who had deposited Alla and Torreb in a clearing nearby.

"What a marvelous world, that has such creatures in it!" Mosaia enthused to Torreb and Alla.

Torreb laughed. "Wait till you see a Tigroid lord, my lord of Clear Water, or meet Tuhl himself."

"Call me Mosaia," he laughed. "Undoubtedly, we will ill be able to afford to stand on such formalities if things get dangerous. The pronouncement of one less syllable might mean the difference between life and death! Here, let me help you with your gear." He shouldered not only his own pack but Torreb's and Alla's as well. Disregarding the look that passed between his companions that wondered less at the show of courtesy than at the amount of weight he was now toting, he started up the one clear trail that led away from the clearing in which the unicorns had left them. "Do you not marvel," he went on as they walked, "at the way so many disparate folk have been brought together by your Minissa for this quest?"

"I marvel at that, and at the timing," agreed Torreb. "Queen Amina told us that the Thalacian bard Deneth and the young Lemurian Habadiah

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were discovered on the same day and left a bare 24 hours before you appeared, Mosaia. Then, before we left the palace this morning, the High Queen herself told us that Prince T'Cru had come in the night just to identify himself to her before he took off on foot for the wood. And Alla and I must have been visited with the Stag almost simultaneously to have ended up on the same transport to Caros from Ereb and to have caught up with you only a day after your arrival. A day later, and I would have been on my way to a place of pilgrimage, then on to my first posting!"

"Perhaps it was the mercy of the Goddess that things were arranged so I might make the journey to Caros in the company of a sympathetic soul," Alla said companionably.

"The Goddess?" asked Mosaia, hearing the capitalization.

Alla laughed. "A habit of speech it will be difficult to break, I'm afraid! My folk have worshiped the Great Goddess, the All-Mother—some would make that the All-Parent—since the dawn of our own history. We have only lately come to know the Pantheon as the Erebiters conceive of it. It will take some adjustment to think of myself as the emissary of a single deity of a group of twelve."

"A dilemma not unlike my own. We worship—well, I suppose you might call it an All-Father," he clarified, seeing their curious looks. "The idea of an entire pantheon, let alone one that includes a feminine aspect of the divine, is foreign to our belief system. Yet I do not think you or I need give up our own beliefs in order to embrace the goodly gods of a belief system not our own. As to the timing, I was very nearly tempted to bring such beautiful precision to naught. The High King and Queen as well as King Strephan and Queen Amina hosted me so cordially I wanted to spend weeks rather than mere days enjoying their hospitality. Yet had I been only a traveler sojourning in a wayside hostel, I could have spent even longer exploring the streets of Caros City and absorbing all there was to know of your culture and mysticism."

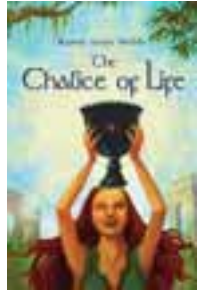
"I wish I could say I felt as at home as you did in the palace," said Alla. "Our folk are not like the Lemurians or even the Tigroids, who live in ordered societies. We are shy of the great clusters of fixed dwellings that the shorter-lived races build for themselves and shier still of any structure where many folk of any race are crowded together."

"Yet you came to Ereb City and navigated your way onto the transport as well as any of us born to the urban way of life might have done," Torreba complimented her. "When you came up to me and asked if you might travel in the company of a priest, and then when you said you feared you were imposing...!" He trailed off with a laugh. "I wondered if you were one of the seraphim who served Minissa and came close to doing you obeisance!"

Alla colored a delicate shade of rose.

"Of course," he said mainly to Mosaia, "all I ended up doing was completely scattering the pile of papers and books I had on the seat beside me. I almost held back from showing you that I bore the mark of the Stag as well, I felt such a fool."

"I'm glad you *did* show me. It made it easier for me to tell you about my visitation."



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“And what was my first reaction but to think to myself, ‘Why do both a major goddess of *my* Pantheon *and* her chief celestial messenger come to an *Aranyaka* and not to a priest of good Erebite stock?’”

She giggled. “No, your first reaction was to decry my phrasing. I didn’t call it a visitation then,” she said for Mosaia’s benefit. “I said we had a lovely chat.”

“Yes,” he said to Mosaia with a rueful grin. “I think I scolded her with, ‘A major deity appears to you in the ethereal flesh and *you have a lovely chat????!!!*’ The more fool I! But I think if I’d been Minissa, I would have done more listening than chatting. I could wish your folk came among mine more, Alla, for we could learn much from you.”

“Yet we do seem to fluster you when we do, even if we’re not out to make mischief,” she said, but there was kindness in her eyes rather than criticism. “I wish I understood why.”

“I don’t know enough about our people interacting to generalize, but when I first set eyes on *you*, I felt—well, a sense of ageless wisdom? But also—I don’t know, it was like I had inhaled a breath of air that had passed through the first forest made by the One and the One’s greatest servants on the Day of Creation.”

“How your eyes light when you speak of that image, friend Torreb!” said Mosaia. He wondered a little at the way Torreb’s eyes had fastened briefly onto Alla’s face, as if to refresh his memory.

“Do they?” He dropped his eyes, then turned them to Mosaia. “I think that has been my fondest desire since I entered the seminary—to witness, if it were only in a vision, that Great Day.”

“It is a wonderful ambition,” said Alla, “and a powerful image for *Aranyaka* as well.”

“And for mine,” agreed Mosaia.

“You see, your folk and mine and Mosaia’s are not so different in the things that matter. Only I wonder...”

“Yes?” Mosaia and Torreb said together.

“You said, Mosaia, that you marveled at the disparate elements represented in this party of questors. *I* marvel that one element has been left out: every race in the Union, indigenous or not, seems to be represented except the Inygewees, at least if what our royal hosts told us was true.”

“That’s the indigenous race of Thalacians,” Torreb explained. “And yet I wonder—they can don physical form if they must but are by nature incorporeal—I wonder if that very nature would have made the journey impossible for them. I wonder at yet another thing.” Their interested looks encouraged him to go on. “If what Their Majesties said is true—if Prince T’Cru will be meeting us here, and if together we make seven... Well, in many cultures, seven is considered to be the ultimate, the most powerfully mystical number there is. But for the Erebiters and Carotians and Thalacians, that number is nine. I thought we would be nine...”

“Maybe we acquire a few more companions along the way,” Alla suggested.

“And perhaps it were a question best directed to this great sage to whose domain we have been sent,” added Mosaia. “Ah, here we are,” he

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said as the entrance to what was evidently an entire complex of caves came into view. "What exactly is Tuhl?"

"He's a Lemurian in his second stage of development," Alla responded. "For years, he was the only one. He is loremaster, wizard, even scientist or warrior at need, if the stories are true." She sighed. "On the surface, it seems that the Lemurians have prospered by integrating into Carotian society even as my folk have dwindled by failing to do so with the Erebites. But most of the Lemurians, by choice, now reject the Sleep of Transformation that would make them as Tuhl is, and that was not so before the Exodus. Instead, they die and fall short of the promise of their race."

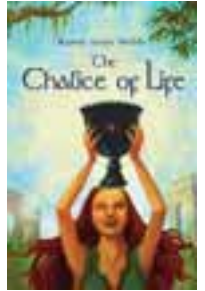
"Tuhl is reputed to be the wisest, most learned creature on the face of any of the three worlds," Torreb added. "His guidance will be worth any currency we have to trade in, though the trade leave us as impoverished as—well, as a poor priest like me on the eve of his first posting!" It netted him a laugh from his companions.

They had gone no more than a few steps up that final leg of the path to what appeared to be the main entrance to the caves when Alla drew up short. Her eyes lost their focus; her head tilted as if she were straining to listen. A moment later, all three sprang forward as a piercing shriek issued from the cave mouth.

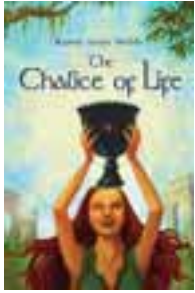
Most people found Tuhl's library to be the strangest of all the peculiar rooms in his dwelling: the deeper into the stacks one went, the more the stacks seemed to stretch out before one, so that the impression it gave was one of truly infinite space. There was, however, one slightly odder room whose lesser repute for strangeness arose from the fact that he admitted far fewer people to its precincts. Tuhl paced back and forth in that room now, listening intently to its only other occupant—T'Cru, who had arrived out of breath moments ago and begged the sage to listen to his story immediately.

Tuhl took no particular notice of his surroundings, but T'Cru's eyes shifted from time to time as he spoke to take in the room's features, so different from the forest and starry skies of his own abode. The room was lit from above by some unseen source, as though the sun itself were diffusing through the living rock that formed the dome. Unlike the corridors and floors of the rest of the place, which tended to be rough-hewn, the floor of this room was as smooth as polished marble. It shone so he could see perfect mirror images of himself and the sage reflected there. Between them, wider than either of them was tall, lay the exact converse of a crystal ball, an inverted hemisphere like a well sunken into the otherwise unbroken expanse of floor. It alone did not reflect the light of the dome above, although it shone with a pearly luminescence of its own.

"Disturbing," Tuhl murmured when T'Cru had explained his experience. "Disturbing, but not completely unexpected. Powerful forces sent Eliander out of this world to protect him from other powerful forces. Not unexpected that his foes would take an interest."



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“But they died thousands of years ago,” said T’Cru. Though he spoke quietly, his voice reverberated in the vast emptiness of the chamber.

An impish smile came to Tuhl’s lips. “Did they? *When seek we the tides of time to change, Serve we ourselves or other pow’r strange?*”

“One of your Lemurian poets?”

“No.” He cackled. “Tuhl wrote that. Sounds better in Lemurian! Still, true, eh? Who knows what powers Eliander’s enemies really served? Thalasia always at war since that time. Much hatred. Much infighting. Much terror in hearts of the common folk for royalty. Not a wholesome place. Better since War, but still out of balance.”

“I see. A proper king would restore that balance.”

“Yes.” He waved his hand, and a wildly off kilter pan balance appeared in the air before him. He thumped the lighter side, whereupon the weight holding down the heavier side of the scale flipped into the air, somersaulted once, and disappeared. “More difficult to dislodge a power thousands of years old.”

T’Cru swallowed. “An immortal? A demon?”

“I think not, though the house of Thalacia was said to have some traditional enemies of that kind. No—feels wrong. So great a menace the gods would have put an end to.”

“Then why not this one, if it concerns the quest?”

He smiled enigmatically and shrugged. “Some problems are sentientkind’s.”

Their conversation was cut short by a piercing scream. T’Cru growled, and his hackles rose. He crouched to spring at the menace the instant it manifested, but Tuhl merely said, “That will be Mistra, I think.” He pointed his staff at the depression in the floor. A bolt shot from its tip. Mistra, still pale from shock, appeared there, hovering over the depression. Although she was suspended in midair, she was postured as though she were kneeling on a solid, level surface. “Show me what you saw, Mistra.”

“Tuhl, I’m frightened.” She was almost sobbing, she who had faced death with no more than a grim smile.

“All is safe. *You* are safe. You see visions only. They will help. Show me.”

Acting chiefly on the strength of his belief, she composed herself, placing her hands in her lap and shutting her eyes. Above her, a flurry of particles appeared. They swirled this way and that, at last eddying into a massive vortex that spun faster and faster, widening with each turn till it formed without warning into the image of a craggy black castle.

“That’s it!” whispered T’Cru. He turned as five people he had never seen came galloping into the room, alerted, he supposed, by Mistra’s cries, then drawn to this spot by some sense beyond the physical. First came two he recognized from Tuhl’s description: Deneth of Thalasia and Habie of the people of Lemur. The bard had already drawn his sword; the young Lemurian bore a dagger in either hand. Behind them came three Tuhl had *not* described: a priest holding aloft a medallion bearing the Balance of Erebus, a warrior with sword in one hand and a medallion whose device he did not recognize in the other, and a woman enfolded in a shimmering

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argus. His best guess was that the woman was an *Aranyaka* preparing to shape shift; the priest obviously came from somewhere within the system, but the knight must not be from the Union at all. Wherever they had all come from, they had hastened here expecting to meet a foe and give battle.

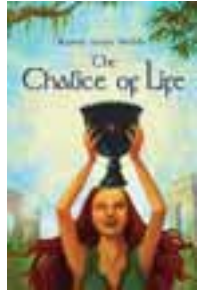
Tuhl chuffed a bit at the little grunts of discomfiture the five of them made as they saw there was nothing here for them to fight after all. "Ssh," he cautioned, gesturing to them to be still. "Don't break her concentration." An onlooker would not have guessed from his manner that five more people—three of them complete strangers, all of them uninvited—had just come blundering into a very private part of the caverns.

As they postured down and turned their attention to Mistra and the scene unfolding before her, the image of the castle began to grow. It grew till it dwarfed Mistra, grew till it entirely filled the space above the Well of Eliannes, grew till they thought it would engulf them. Yet when any of the seven that stood beyond the Well summoned the strength to look away, he saw that the castle remained confined by the very margins that circumscribed the Well itself. Mistra, her face a mask of intense concentration, began to chant soundlessly. Her gaze remained fixed on the image above her, which had now grown so large the vast double doors that served as the castle's main entrance framed her completely.

"This is where it blew up," T'Cru whispered to Tuhl, but Tuhl merely put a finger to his lips. He might have been waiting for something more to happen. And, indeed, light began to well forth from the double doors, light so bright as to be searing. But just as all in the room felt they must turn away or be blinded, the glow softened. When their eyes adjusted to the dimming light, they saw that they were now peering inside the walls of the castle itself.

The room they saw appeared to be a laboratory of some sort. Jars and vials labeled in twisted characters lined tables that ran the length and breadth of the cavernous chamber. Wards of every description had been scribed in the floor and walls. A vague shimmer in the air above some of the thaumaturgic circles suggested that the laboratory's owner had brought nether creatures to this place, then confined them as a lingering testament to his might. Wings there might have been, and tails and fangs, but worse was the pervasive sense of evil and danger that made itself felt even through the haze of the vision.

The most riveting sight of all, however, was the single visible occupant of the room. Bent over his work at one of the lab benches, he was yet a tall and powerful man. Dark, bearded, handsome in a primal sort of way, he had the look of wisdom that suggested age and the look of reckless vigor that suggested youth. His visage was shrewd, perhaps not so much evil as self-absorbed, and he exuded a raw sensuality. Had any of them been speaking at that moment, the sense of raw power that emanated from him would have struck them dumb. That sense escalated as he looked up, aware suddenly that he was being observed, and took in his uninvited company. In that moment, there came a subtle shift in the feel of the vision that told even Mosaia that this was simple vision no longer: a weak conduit was actually beginning to open between that world and this. As one, the party



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tried to resume its battle stance; as one, they became aware of the appalling sense that their limbs were not obeying them, though whether this was the effect of a spell or of shock or of the staggering presence of the man before them, even Tuhl could not have said.

The wizard—he obviously had some facility with the Art, and they could only hope that he had no more potentially devastating powers at his command—straightened. He began to sign, then stopped. A look of anger, followed by a look of scrutiny, followed by one of vague amusement crossed his face. From those three looks arose a sequence of three impressions. The first was that he was upset at the invasion of his privacy and was preparing to eject them—painfully. The second was that he supposed he should get a better look at anyone who had gotten past the wards on the castle gate, as such a one might represent a serious threat. The third was that, once he had appraised them, he had decided they weren't such a threat after all. Of the three, the last was the worst. Beyond cutting like knives, that final amused smile with its sense of dismissal made them all feel like insects trodden underfoot by a colossus.

Alla was the first to turn away, her primal sense of order and harmony seriously disturbed by the mere sight of this man. Torreb lasted just a bit longer. Mosaia's look was studious—here was an enemy who was evil incarnate, and the paladin must learn how best to deal with him. Deneth merely continued to size the fellow up: defiance was in his posture. T'Cru had again gathered to spring: only the touch of Tuhl's hand restrained him. Habie was the only one who was clearly delighted, this being her first real glimpse of something from Beyond.

But Tuhl's true focus was on neither T'Cru nor the castle and its lone occupant. He alone had turned his attention to Mistra; he alone saw that she was trying frantically to break the contact. He alone grasped how close she was to failing now that this was no longer a mere vision. He took in the way she suddenly stopped struggling. For a long moment, she seemed to be listening, or somehow absorbing a message the wizard was sending directly into her mind. Her eyes widened at something he communicated. Then he beckoned. She paled visibly and made an attempt to back away, but there was no place to go. Slowly, she began to rise toward the image.

At this, Tuhl stepped forward to the very edge of the well and rapped his staff once on the floor. The mage's gaze shifted to him. His change in expression suggested he found Tuhl, at least, to be worthy of his notice. A palpable tension grew in the air between them. Those observing the scene felt the change in the very air around them and knew that the barrier separating them from the castle and the mage had now become frighteningly thin.

Then, a beat before the mounting tension would have sent them screaming from the room, Tuhl raised his staff. Light flashed from the staff's head toward the mage, but he saw it coming. An instant before it inflicted damage, he spread his hands in a gesture of abnegation and the entire picture vanished. What remained was an image so dark and featureless that light itself might have ceased to have meaning within its confines. There was an audible pop as the opening conduit snapped shut.

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Mistra put her head in her hands. "Tuhl, get me down from here," she said, her voice weary. At a gesture from the sage, she drifted, as if pushed by a gentle breeze, to the edge of the well. Tuhl nodded to Mosaia, who reached for her. At the knight's touch, she dropped lightly into his arms, but she began to tremble violently the instant he moved her away from the Well. Tuhl inverted his staff and dipped it into the Well; when he withdrew it, the head had formed into a ladle. Although it appeared as empty as the Well itself, a nacreous fluid spilled from it as he inverted it at Mosaia's feet. From the pool formed by the fluid sprouted a long divan.

"Lay her here," Tuhl directed. "She was torn too quickly from the influence of the Well of Eliannes and from her vision, but there was no other way."

"Thank you," she murmured as Mosaia set her down. She drew a deep breath and sighed; the trembling subsided. A sheen of perspiration lingered on her brow, however: anyone just entering the room would have assumed she had been engaged in hard physical labor.

"What was it?" asked Deneth.

"It was a monster," Alla hissed. She, too, had begun to shiver. She drew close to Torreb, who put his arm around her.

Tuhl now addressed the three newcomers. "I am Tuhl," he said, taking the initiative. "You sought my abode and have found it, though it presented a friendlier face to those of your companions who arrived before today!" And he quickly introduced everyone, even the newcomers, in such detail that his entire occupation since their souls had come forth from the Great Void might have been chronicling their lives. He took in the way Alla's eyes lingered a little on the bard the way Habie's did as well as the way the men were jockeying for position without conscious thought around Mistra's couch, but if this meant anything to him, he kept his own counsel.

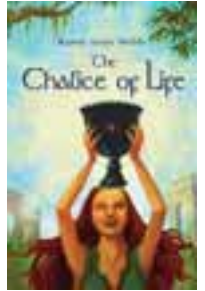
"You've made all the introductions but one," Deneth pointed out when he had finished, tilting his gaze in the direction of the Well of Eliannes.

Tuhl pursed his lips and considered how to respond. "As I was telling T'Cru," he said after a brief pause, "those who work evil often do the work of others. Evil was at work the day Prince Eliander vanished from the world. The same evil may want him never to ascend the throne of Thalas, even these thousands of years later."

"He seemed frightened of *you*, Master Tuhl," said Mosaia, kneeling at Mistra's side and gently chafing her hand when he noted a shiver pass down her spine. "Does he know you?"

"Power will recognize power, in whatever form it takes, but most often like will call to like. I am an ancient power, and Mistra is a formidable worker of the Art as we know it here. Thus did the wizard come unbidden on Mistra in her meditations; thus did he know me for a mighty force, though he knew not my name. Even the Chief Priestess of Minissa and the noble T'Cru could but glimpse the shell of the castle, and that from a distance, try as they might to penetrate it. But sorcerers call to each other, speak to each other, sometimes subliminally, because of that power they share. Thoughts, impressions—much more passes than mere words."

"What did you learn, Mistra?" asked Alla.



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“Well,” she replied with a short laugh, “for some reason I couldn’t fathom, he grasps the nature of our task—and he’d very much like us to fail.”

“Big help,” Deneth grunted. “I could have told you that.”

The others shushed him almost in unison. Mistra went on, her smile still wan, “He doesn’t think enough of our chances just yet to do much to stop us. You probably all caught that nuance that he thinks we’re a pretty pathetic lot. Even if I’m misinterpreting or he was putting on a show for us, it’s pretty demoralizing to be dismissed out of hand like that.”

“Oh? He seemed to like *you* well enough.” He gave her a little dig on the shoulder, then inched his hand downward to grasp her free hand.

She sighed wearily. “Liked? No.” She gently shrugged herself loose of the men’s collective grasp as if to signal that, while she appreciated the show of attention, she had now recovered sufficiently to manage on her own. All three took the hint, but none strayed more than an arm’s length away. “He only felt he had the most to gain from dominating me. Silly wizard.” The little twist to the grin she flashed them underscored the irony of the remark. “And if any of you feel slighted by his lack of attention, I can tell you he really overlooked none of us.”

“Why does that worry me?”

“Because he was sizing all of us up to see what might buy our cooperation, except maybe Tuhl.”

“No,” Tuhl corrected quietly. “Even me.”

“Well?” demanded Deneth. “What did he see?” His mouth twisted into a wry grin as he took in the shocked looks the rest aimed at him. “I just mean,” he went on, enunciating as if he were addressing the hearing-impaired, “that maybe if you forewarn us, we can get the High Monarchy to ante up an appealing counteroffer before we even leave the wood.”

“To ensure our loyalty?” she asked drily.

“Hey, some of us have a living to earn. Eck won’t pay my salary indefinitely if I’m off gallivanting around space or time or wherever this little excursion is going to take us.”

“Nor the Brotherhood of Ereb mine,” chuckled Torreb, finally grasping that the bard was trying to lighten the moment with humor.

“Perhaps,” Mosaia said, playing along, “neither your High Monarchy nor this Hellspawn of a wizard would be able to offer us the inducements we would find appealing.”

“Getting your soul saved, for example?” asked Deneth. “*There* would be an ironic price for betraying the rest of us and condemning the Union to a slow death.”

“From what Mistra’s family said,” observed Habie, “there would be some things they had the power to offer but *couldn’t* because of your Ethic.” She shook her head gravely. “And I understood what they meant! See, Mistra? You guys are corrupting me already!” Even those of the party who hadn’t approved of Deneth’s making sport of the subject had to laugh at that.

“Anyway,” Mistra went on, “I don’t know what he *saw*, I only know that he *knows*.”

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Deneth emitted a noise that from T'Cru would have been a low growl. "It would put an interesting spin on that whole issue of dismissal if what he was really saw was what it would take to buy one of us—and found, to his surprise, that he could easily afford it."

Sensing the gloom that remark precipitated, Mistra jumped in with, "Well, on the bright side, I don't know how likely we'll be to run into him in the flesh: his one great limitation is that he's trapped outside normal space just like Eliander is—on his own plane, maybe. And I got a name—Syndycyr. His *true* name, I think, much good may it do us! To sense his innate power and cunning, having access to his true name may not do us much good. His power is phenomenal—it makes mine look like that of a week-old Carotian infant."

Tuhl made a chuffing sound in the back of his throat. "You *had* your powers as a week-old Carotian infant, Mistra of Caros. Your powers are separated from those of the day of your birth by no more than the step of realization."

She tried to smile, but her lips resisted the effort and stretched into a yawn. "Gods, I'm exhausted! I think I could have broken the contact myself, but I don't arm myself to do battle before I go to my prayers... Thank you—all of you—for bearing with me. I do not take on the role of maiden in distress easily." She stifled a laugh at the way the men postured almost in unison, as if to say they would enjoy coming to her rescue at any time. As quickly, she wrote off the perception as one born of exhaustion. Her eyelids fluttered as though she were having difficulty staying awake. "Tuhl?"

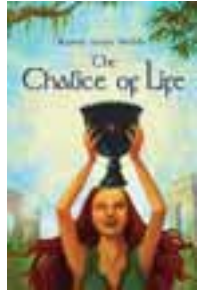
"It's all right," Tuhl said, as if he were soothing a terrified child. He waved his staff in the air above her recumbent form; a silvery dust fell in the wake of its passage. "Sleep. Let your mind be at ease."

Mosaia stood as she dropped off. "Master Tuhl," he said, "if she has seen where this fiend resides, and he came upon her in her meditations and then recognized you with his waking eyes, is there not a chance he has placed you or somehow identified your abode? Is it not, in fact, possible that he now knows exactly where we are?"

Tuhl smiled. "Oh, yes, most assuredly."

"Then we should wake Mistra and get started."

"Yes, yes. Leave soon. But know, no evil power enters Tuhl's wood except by his leave. You are safe here. Your journey will even start from Tuhl's little realm. And Tuhl has gifts for you, special gifts blessed by the gods in ages past. But little chance of respite will you have once your journey begins. The matter is not so pressing that you cannot tarry a day or two in Tuhl's wood if you put the time to good use. Fortify yourselves! Become acquainted with one another's characters and talents! And as for those of you who may have difficulties to surmount and preparations to make of a special nature, see that you attend to them." And he bent his eye on each of them in turn, yet his gaze lingered longest on Deneth and on the recumbent Mistra.



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Mistra's first thought when she learned of Tuhl's admonition was that he was offering a warning to herself and Deneth. She as the sole Carotian and he as the lone Thalacian in the party—and she a member of the House that had suffered most cruelly at the hands of the last Thalacian king—had the greatest chance of becoming mutually antagonistic. Her second thought was to wonder with what eyes the sage was seeing! The two of them had been practicing together daily since Deneth's arrival. The bard knew so much about her chosen art form and she about his that in any other year they would have been making grant applications and soliciting rich widows with the thought of funding an artistic collaboration that would shake the Carotian arts world to its roots. For now, it was an exceptionally pleasant way to pass the time and transcend the polite formalities common to strangers thrown together by circumstance.

If friction were to arise, she thought, it would more likely be between herself and Mosaia, who seemed to alternate between wanting to prostrate himself in her presence and wanting to cast out the devils she knew he suspected possessed her. Torreb also often seemed on the verge of wanting to worship at her feet, but she had ascribed it to his discomfort with being in the presence of royalty. Deneth seemed to be provoking the same sense of adoration in Alla and Habie, but he was handling it, she thought, with greater aplomb.

The day after the impromptu conclave, the pair had been working for several hours when she called a halt, feeling she had been drowning herself a little too deeply in her work. Perhaps she should extricate herself from the comfort zone she had built with Deneth (with Habie as well, for the girl had joined them to learn something of the fundamentals of music and dance and showed surprising aptitude) and query Mosaia and Torreb about their reaction to her.

She grabbed a towel one of the trees had been holding for her and plopped down next to Deneth. "That was wonderful!" she enthused. "I appreciate the data solid Tuhl created for me, but it's so much better with live music, and you compose as magnificently as you play." If Mistra had been tone-deaf, still she would have seen that this was so from the reactions of the woodland around them. If Deneth were playing no more than a simple folk melody as she warmed up, the shiest of animals would come hopping up to investigate. But when he played his own compositions for her center work, they stood as if entranced. Butterflies would brush against his cheek. Wildflowers and tree branches would wave as if they were marking his rhythms; Mistra got the impression that they actually wished they could reach out to touch him as the source of such delightful melodies.

"Thanks. It's the instrument, partly."

"Sure, pal." She flashed him the grin she had reserved for her consorts and very few others. "Pal" had become a kind of left-handed endearment for them, a private joke that acknowledged both the chemistry they generated and the common sense that told them the beginning of a quest of epic proportions was not the time to launch into a liaison of any size at all. What effect would a lovers' quarrel have on the ability of one of them to

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jump down the throat of a dragon to save the other?

"It's true. It's magical. See?" He proffered it to her.

"It's a beautiful instrument," she said appreciatively as she took it from him. "Any of our guildsmen would have been proud to have cranked this out, magical or not."

"Crafted? You mean they wouldn't just sort of zap it into existence?"

That elicited a giggle. "Oh, maybe a practice instrument here and there. But it's like anything else we do. If we *can* do it without shaping the Ether with the Art or bending material substance with one of the Disciplines, we do."

"Yeah, I've heard the drill," he chuckled. "I just never believed it would work out that way in practice. I guess you get jaded if you visit enough places where people talk a good game then do what's expedient. I mean, I could understand the people who were less gifted using the Ethic to hide behind—y'know, 'I could do this by magic but it's beneath me' translates to 'Doing this with magic is beyond me.' But the royal family is so gifted they could decimate entire star systems without batting an eyelash."

"We *could* bully the universe but we don't?" She laughed. "I have an aunt who keeps the Ethic so strictly she still boils her own tea water by hand. That's an extreme example, but we do take our Covenant with the Pantheon very seriously. We're favored and gifted and all that, but we're also held up as an example. We'd be the first people to be deprived of our access to the Art if we misused it, favored of the gods or not, for just that reason."

"You believe that, too? I mean, about being deprived of it all if you misuse it?"

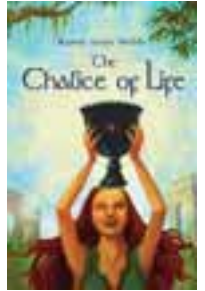
"Oh, yes! It happened less than a generation ago, and in my own family." She hoped he didn't mind the way she felt a sudden need to change the subject. "Does your lute -er- explode or anything if anyone besides you strums it?"

"No, it doesn't explode," he mimicked with a laugh. "Of course, only *I* know how to invoke its spells." He gave her an outrageous leer. "Not that I couldn't be tortured into revealing their secrets to a favored few."

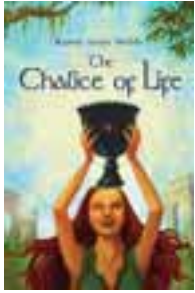
She started to pick out a little folk tune. "Are those spells what got Habie so besotted with you? And the timeless Alla, who should know better?"

"Oh, you noticed that!" He grinned—ruefully, she thought. "No, that's a little curse I picked up during my studies offworld. Females—*any* females—have a fair to middling chance of becoming, as you say, besotted with me if they spend any time in my company. I practically have to throw them from the top of the nearest tall building to discourage them once it's taken hold! The royal house of Caros seems to be the sole existing exception." He flashed her an ironic look that said he wished he had erred in his assessment and that his curse would show some signs of working on her.

"If you're talking about my sister and my mother, the bonds of spiritual union our people form—and that would include marriage—are proof against even deific magic."



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He flashed her a seductive smile. “What about you?” he asked in a bedroom whisper. “You’re unattached.”

She returned the smile. “You needed no magic but your music to get *me* besotted.” She held his eye for a moment to let him know that she intended the remark as sincere compliment as well as deflection. “So, did you have the rest of the ladies of the court falling all over you?”

“No!” he chuckled. “I didn’t want to cause a diplomatic incident! While the rest of the men in my party fraternized their way up one wing of the palace and down the next, I kept myself carefully sequestered.” He grinned. “Of course, non-fraternization spared me the lectures on Carotian mysticism and the defiances offered by the young ladies with whom my friends got too chummy! Can’t say I feel particularly deprived on that score. On Thalás, if a woman takes offense, she acts on the moment. She may slap you across the face or stick a knife in your vitals, but then that’s the end of it.” He shrugged. “It could be worse, I guess. It could have left me enchanting men or slime devils. I like my company female and human—or at least *humanoid*.”

She grinned, stopped plucking and looked up. “Let me guess. Someone’s mother?”

“Uh-huh. A complete—well, what your folk would call a mundane. She needed herbs and bat’s wings and Phino knows what all else. But it took. Proximity activates it, and Habie plummeted right into my arms while I was having my audience with your sister about this.” He indicated his shoulder. “She’d been prowling the palace and was seeing where the cooling ducts would lead her—frankly, I think she was testing her limits and seeing at just what point your family would have her clapped in irons! Anyway, it was an older part of the palace, and she leaned a little too hard against the ventilator screen while she was eavesdropping on our conversation—and down she tumbled. She says she decided that if a fellow thief and brawler had been picked and had decided to have a go at the quest, then she could go along to. And I think it’s as well—she’s very good at what she does.”

She cocked a brow. “A *fellow* thief and brawler?”

He grinned. “One picks up many peripheral talents in the streets of postwar Thalás City. My family may be minor nobility, but that and two credits gets a serious musician on Thalás no more than a cup of cheap coffee if he can’t prove himself in a dozen other ways.”

“Most of which involve mayhem?” She quirked him a smile, but the thought came as close to making her stop in her tracks as made no odds. It might have evoked horror in another, but in her it evoked only pity and a little sadness for the cruelty of the cosmos. “I’m sorry,” she said solemnly. “In war, it’s most often the rulers who are the aggressors, but it seems like it’s everyone else who suffers.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. His look said he accepted the sympathy that would have been empty platitude in another. She brightened. “Here, if that curse is burdensome, let me see what I can do about it before we have female creatures in a thousand dimensions pining after you. Er- that is, if you want me to.” She dropped her gaze shyly: she suddenly realized many people in the cosmos might well

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construe her offer as a liberty she had no right to take.

"Of course I want you to. Well, that is—unless you can fix it so I can turn it on and off at will?"

Laughing at his comically hopeful expression, she set the lute aside and knelt facing him. "Here. Hold still." She touched a hand to his brow in an effort to probe the parameters of the spell. It was simple enough, having been cast by someone with no native ability. She concentrated, visualized the words and components that the witch had used, and—

She got no further before her ability to concentrate lapsed completely. Too late, she grasped that opening the gates to this intimate a contact without taking the proper precautions had been a mistake. She was overpowered by the sense of him peering into her naked soul as she was peering into his. The weight of his desire for her she could nearly have borne without responding, but once she confronted the answering yearning in herself, she was lost.

Like the snap of a bowstring drawn too long taut, she fell into his arms. His lips met hers in a breathless frenzy. She did not have to guide him. His hands and mouth gravitated spontaneously to places she had been obliged to point out even to her consorts; his touch upon each was such that she convulsed with the pleasure of it. *I should still be in mourning*, rang a small voice at the back of her mind—but the voice was becoming hazier by the minute, and she could not force herself to respond.

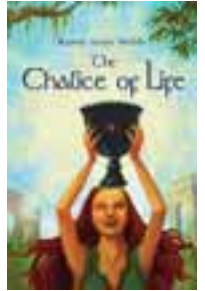
After a long moment, they fell apart, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry," he panted. "I know we agreed—"

"My fault," she said. "I erected no barriers between my mind and yours." She smiled wanly. "Why guard myself from the man whose music made my heart beat for the first time in weeks as though it again had life and purpose?"

"Life and purpose?" he reflected in a bedroom whisper. "I like the sound of that." He took up a strand of her hair that had come loose in those first frenetic moments and kissed it. "Is this how all Carotian women affect their men? Because I'm not usually this forward... on such... short... acquaintance..." He punctuated his words with nuzzles and caresses; after "acquaintance," he simply gave up trying to speak.

It took Mistra a moment to regain her bearings. Other considerations faded to black before the consuming desire she had to drown herself in him, to have him lose himself in her. It was only the reflex action of attending to her own mental architecture that allowed her to put aside want in favor of need. The sense of reaching was there in the pit of her soul, and there was a response from him, as if the hands of two small children sought to clasp across a gulf of twilight. She knew there was a part of her that, if released, would bridge that gulf. More, it would take him in a grip so strong it might well strangle the life out of him—but she, too, would be a victim. Beyond that, she had the sense that, if the two small hands could of their own volition cross the gulf and clasp, some force outside their control would pry them apart: they would become like pieces of a shattered vase reassembled perfectly before anyone had thought to apply the glue.

"Deneth," she panted, squealing a little and bucking as he ran his hand



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over one of those spots she had in common with no one else in the cosmos, “we can’t do this.”

“Yes, we can,” he replied, his voice muffled by a complete swath of her hair that had now slipped its bonds. A beat later her tone of voice must have registered, for he broke off and met her eyes. “Is this where I get the lecture on Carotian mysticism?” he asked ingenuously. His eyes were teasing, but his voice was quite serious.

It brought her up short, that he would frame it that way when she as yet only suspected the exact nature of the problem. She studied him, caressed his mind lightly with her own, saw that there had been a time when he would have taken more account of the responsiveness of her body than the pleading in her voice; at that time, he would have supposed more ardor would still her protests. She continued to ponder, but what came out of her mouth was, “Do you *want* a lecture?”

“No,” he said pointedly, but he shifted his weight a little to underscore what he *did* want, just in case she hadn’t been paying attention. He kept the pressure up till he had elicited one more little squeal, then relented. “Nor do I want to be the one who causes the diplomatic incident.” He cast a glance at their intertwined bodies that told her he felt all that avoidance had gone for nought if the first arms he had fallen into belonged to a woman who was daughter to two monarchs and sister to a third.

“Then let me up. Your suggestion about the lecture—it just crystallized the nature of the problem for me. I need a few moments in Tuhl’s lab to see if what I *think* is going on really *is* going on.”

“Mistra, I know what’s going on: you just asked me to downshift on the instant from high gear into first. And instead of slamming my foot down on the accelerator, I hit the brakes. See? You *are* affecting me.”

She chuckled. “Ah, but not in the way—oh, say 87½ of every hundred Carotian women would affect a man of good Thalybdenocian stock. Don’t worry, I won’t cheat you: if I’m wrong, we can pick up again right where we’re leaving off.”

“Give me a moment to mark my place, then, eh?” he said, nibbling on her ear one last time. “What if you’re right?” he asked as she rose and dusted herself off.

“If I’m right, I’ll be canvassing Tuhl’s lab to find something that can change me into a different species.”

“All right,” he replied. This time his look said he was wondering what problem could be so bad it would take genetic rearrangement to fix, but it quickly melted into that expression that was as much outrageous leer as grin. “Just don’t tell me you’re throwing me over so you can check out the rest of the merchandise with a clear conscience.”

“What?!” It came out a little clipped.

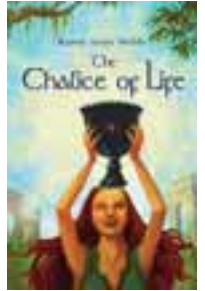
He tucked his hands behind his head in an affectedly feline way. “Y’know—don’t let me catch you checking out Mosaia and Torreb to see if their parts fit better with yours than mine do before decide which of us you’d most like to snuggle up to on a cold night.”

“Miserable swine!” she spat at him. The scowl she gave him must have been murderous indeed: he recoiled as if he feared she might turn him into

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KAREN ANNE WOOD

a toad for the affront. All she could bring herself to do, though, was to aim one good swat at his arm: she could think of a few Carotian men well versed in their own Mysteries who would not have been this gracious had they found themselves in Deneth's situation. She reversed course and sped toward the caves. She had to suppress a giggle as she heard a plaintive "But what about my curse?" drifting after her on the early evening wind.

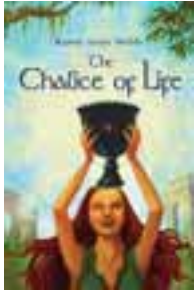


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CHAPTER 4



Gifts and Dreams

78

“...But remember the favours of the Pantheon towards you, when ye were strangers and He made friendship between your hearts, and on the morrow ye were, by Their favor, brothers.”
—The Book of Life

FROM THE JOURNAL OF MOSAIA, LORD CLEAR WATER:

I fear that I have been bewitched, as if that one small joke Brother Paulus made about a love spell has risen up to smite me like a curse. Would that my trusted counselor were here now! I would go for advice to my brother in holy orders, Torreb of Ereb, yet at times, he seems as besotted as I. I cannot call it an irrational ardor, for Princess Mistra is the most comely of women—high of heart, fearing of her own gods and versed in her own Mysteries, valiant in a way I thought only a man could be yet modest and decorous in her bearing. She extends me every courtesy, never utters a word to me that could not be broadcast before the Pontifex Maximus, yet—Father in Heaven forgive me and grant me peace!—my reaction to her is one I have only felt in the presence of a lady of the evening I once had occasion to arrest while on patrol in the town of Waterford. Yet the Princess’ attitude toward me—toward us all—has been no more than congenial as one is congenial to a comrade in arms. My way here was eased to such an extent that I cannot but wonder if my willingness to accept as comrades those who traffic in magic is being

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tested. To whom can I turn for assistance when all those around me utilize these strange powers as a birthright? Who will understand my plight?

Mistra sat in the lab she had put together shortly after she had come to the wood. The sinking feeling had not left her: she could think of only one phenomenon that could account for both herself and Deneth being trapped in that inexorable tide after having owned the attraction and put it in its place. The substance she sought was not unique to Carotian women, but only Carotians produced such a surge. She set the blood scanner—the parameters for its analysis had to be entered by hand—then secured a blood sample from her arm and fed the blood into the machine. To pass the time while she awaited the readout, she set to work on a potion that would cure Deneth of his curse. She had done honors work in biochemistry and physics in school—by the time she had been invited to join the Carotian Royal Ballet, she had had several patents to her name as well as a number of major awards for innovation in the her chosen fields—and had always found remarkable similarities between the creative application of both the Art and the sciences she loved.

She had just finished his concoction when the analyzer ticked on. She read the data tape with a sense of impending doom, reread it, then put her head in her hands and swore. “Damn” came first, then “Gods of hell,” followed by an aerobic workout of an extensive but rarely used vocabulary of curses and, finally, a whined “Why now?” She allowed herself to be distracted by her sense that Deneth had entered the room.

“I hope none of that was aimed at me,” said the bard.

She raised her head and proffered the potion, a watery violet fluid that smelled vaguely of honeysuckle.

“Something in the way of an aphrodisiac? Poison,” he added drily, “or something to wither my manhood untimely?”

Her smile was wan. “There’s a popular vein of humor on Caros about Thalacian men keeping their brains inside their knickers rather than under their hats. Today, I’d say I just got called to account for all those jokes.”

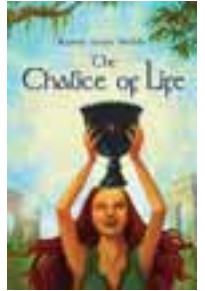
“Oh, yeah, that’s why I’ve been showering with ice cubes for the past hour!” he laughed.

“That potion won’t still any particular drives, but it *will* lift your curse.” She grinned. “Your manhood will have the same chance of longevity it ever had with, I suspect, no change in proportions.”

“Thank you! And you, what are you so busily—?” He had come two steps closer than he needed to take the potion from her outstretched hand, then begun to hyperventilate to such an extent that he was forced lean against the lab bench for support.

Mistra bowed her head and concentrated on connecting with his autonomic nervous system. “It’s me, not you,” she explained once he had recovered, noting with some alarm how rapidly her effect on him was worsening. “In this one instance, the line about not being able to control oneself would have been very close to the truth—for either of us! Does this mean anything to you?” Keeping her distance, she slid the printout over to him.

“I know just enough to know that, whatever this is, there’s a whole



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truckload of it—in you?” He tapped a spot where the readout erupted into a series of tall spikes.

“Uh-huh. I’ve done a lot of zipping back and forth in time as well as space these last two years, with the result that I’ve just entered the *tal-yosha* about eighteen months early.” She cocked her head at him. “You know what that is?”

“Yes, and in case you hear it otherwise from Habie, I was making some rather crude jokes about it in the pub where I was involved in that brawl she heard about.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Something about Carotian females only being real women a small percentage of the time.” He grinned and raked a hand through his hair. “Boy, I think *I* just got called to account for *those!*”

She grinned back. “Don’t worry—I’ve heard most of the jokes, and from races far outside the Union. I think our native abilities frighten so many peoples, they feel compelled to find *something* in our culture that lets them poke fun at us.”

His grin twisted so it was at once wry and rueful. “If the past few days represent the wallop your women pack when nature isn’t actively helping you to perpetuate the species, I think I’ll just go and have my tongue amputated—well, my tongue, and maybe my -er- brains.”

She smiled. “Then the cosmos will be deprived prematurely of one of its finest bards—and, I’m sure, one of its most sensitive and considerate lovers.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “That’s charitable of you. I’d have thought you’d have felt less savaged if you’d been attacked by a tribe of rabid gorilla men from Dantos II.”

She bent a kindly eye on him. “You savaged my body very little, and my soul not at all.” She tapped the series of spikes on the readout, noting with dismay that her heart began to race if she so much as leaned too far in his direction. “This is the culprit. Carotian men get used to a certain background level of it. It’s a hormone peculiar to women of the race of Thalybdenos, but its production—at least as far as the severity of the surge that triggers the *tal-yosha* goes—seems to be bound up with use of the Art.”

“So it surges the most in you and the least in us?”

“Exactly. Since the Erebites rely as much on the Disciplines as the Art to practice their form of mentalic healing, Erebite women seem to have landed somewhere in the middle. It has, in the parlance of the healers, both endocrine and exocrine functions.”

He nodded cannily. “Which means you’re being affected as well.” He flashed her a grin. “So it wasn’t just my rugged good looks and charm that made you—what do they say in those tawdry Thalacian romance holos?—mad with desire? Still, you were kind enough not to turn me into a newt when you told me to stop and it took my brain—the one in my head—a moment to catch up with the one in my braes.”

She stifled a silly laugh at the image, then regarded him a moment before she spoke. The heart of the Mysteries was still not easy to explain to an outsider. How to tell a man from a race that had disowned those same Mysteries long ago that there was an entire otherworldly landscape to her

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people, a landscape of mind and soul that had a life beyond the body, that it was a significant part of even so physical an act of the joining of man and woman? "I think," she said, waxing expansive in a direction she was certain he would grasp, "a major difference between your world and mine is that here, if a man possesses a great treasure, he feels free to place it in his front window in full view of anyone who cares to look. On Thalás, I think he must feel compelled to build a great fortress to hide it and so conceal it from the sight of all who would use the knowledge against him."

His face did one of those little gymnastic turns as one eyebrow tried to meet the corresponding side of his mouth. It worked out to a lopsided smile. "An interesting assessment from a Carotian. I would only amend that I hid my music very little once I had proven myself in battle and street skirmish and had out-thieved most of the men in the local Thieves' Guild, not that they're anything so much now that the war is a score of years gone. But, yes, I suppose you could say that before that the fortress was a mighty edifice, bristling with spikes and top heavy with battlements."

She could feel her eyes light with merriment. "I was thinking of your music as less of a treasure in and of itself and as more of a portal leading into the depths of the fortress, for those who choose to look." The merriment left to be replaced by something far more thoughtful. "When I hear your music, I see into the magnificence of your soul. It is a soul far too great to cause injury to a friend, and it takes no act of augury to see that you and I will be great friends." The merriment returned. "It is certainly far too great a soul to be captured in the body of a newt. A jeweled thunder lizard from Tritis III, perhaps..."

His look suggested that he might be contemplating his appearance with a jeweled hide scintillating in the moonlight. Seconds later, however, his look changed to one that said he was not about to trade in levity. "I—uh, Mistra, I—" he started. Stalling out completely, he smacked a hand to his brow. "Listen to me! I'm in the highest echelon of bards the Emerald Brotherhood ever honors, I've outperformed and outcomposed every poet or musician Thalás has seen for the past century—and I haven't a clue what to say."

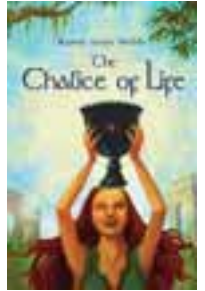
"Then say nothing," she said kindly. "I wasn't angling for a reply."

He pursed his lips. "I sometimes think that the real difference between your people and mine is that Thalacians can barely keep body and soul together, while you—well, for Carotians, it seems like the crux of your whole culture is that you can barely pry the two apart, or tell one from the other."

She came very close to describing the entire matter to him just then: anyone who could make *that* observation would not find it a large leap to think those souls could bond for a mortal lifetime and beyond. But he reentered the conversation a beat too soon, and she had to admit to a pang of relief. She could not have borne having her beliefs subjected to analysis, let alone derision, with the heartache so close.

"The *tal-yosha*—how do your folk usually deal with it?" He chortled. "I think I saw no signs in the city saying `bacchanalia this way.'"

She laughed, thinking that he and perhaps three other people in the



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cosmos could have gotten away with the remark. “Deneth, you must understand that the compulsion is not just to sexual revel but to bond, to find a life’s mate. Because children inevitably come of a union made during the *tal-yosha*, consortium is only lawful during the other seven years of the cycle. When the *tal-yosha* strikes a Carotian woman, she bonds for life or abstains; those of us who abstain try to steer clear of men we find attractive. I did a lot of service at the Temple of Minissa the last time I went through this! I think the priestesses thought I had taken up residence.”

“No such luck this time, eh? And no fair taking advantage of the -uh- technologies?”

How to answer that meaningfully? she thought. “I think a technology has never been invented that can protect that which is not of the body,” she said wistfully, then sighed. “Why couldn’t Minissa have chosen just women or just non-humanoids like T’Cru to be my companions?” She rubbed a spot between her brows where a headache was threatening to strike. “I’m *such* a bad example of Carotian womanhood. We’re supposed to be so cerebral and ethical and spiritual and knowledgeable about sharing the gift with wisdom—and I was just getting to the point where the thought of sharing a bed with a man who was friend rather than consort had its appeal.”

His smile was kind. “That doesn’t sound so lacking in wisdom to me, nor does it sound unduly sensual, unethical, or vainglorious. If you can’t make use of the common technologies, we’ll just have to find a way to deal with you so you quit affecting yourself and the men around you.”

“We?”

He grinned sheepishly. “My magnificent soul is too great to leave a friend to tackle a problem this big all by herself, or to just leave her in the lurch. If I know nothing of biochemistry, I can still give you moral support—from a safe distance.”

She smiled a very relieved thanks.

“Here, wait a bit. You said your men get used to having a certain ambient level of this stuff in the air, but Thalacians and Erebites are of the same stock. If *your* men can get accustomed to it, then why not try...?”

They worked far into the night.

Mosaia clove through the helm of the phantom opponent before him, levering his sword free just in time to whirl and slash across the abdomen of the one that was attacking from the rear. In real life, had his opponent been wearing the right sort of armor, this last would not have been a fatal strike. However, the device manipulating the simulacra signaled a critical hit. Both opponents winked out of existence.

“Bravo, Lord Cl -er- Mosaia,” said Torreb, who was working the controls for him in Tuhl’s absence. “What do you think of Master Tuhl’s facilities?”

“The Carotian Union is truly eons ahead of my world when it comes to technology!” the knight enthused. “I think if my father had this device

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and a more expansionist attitude, our barony could have brought our entire province under its control a decade ago.”

“So he might have trained armies with it? An interesting application.”

“A necessary concomitant of living on a planet where peace is not the norm.”

The young priest’s brow knit in perplexity. “I am sorry to learn that you live in a place so torn by war.”

“At least having to defend my homeland during most seasons of war allowed me to come early to my knighthood. I hope I can put my skills to use to defend you all if our quest takes us to places where we must fight to survive.”

“And I hope we don’t shame you in our meager efforts to support your defense of us! Ready to go again?”

“Yes, please.”

“Four opponents again?”

His eyes twinkled. “I would gladly try my skill against five. Whatever their ‘flesh’ and ‘armor’ are made of, it all cleaves a bit more easily than real sinew and steel. I’d like to feel I’m keeping my edge, or sharpening it a bit before we embark.”

“Five it is.”

Torreb fiddled with the controls, and five of the phantoms phased into existence in a circle around the knight. Mosaia evaluated, let them make the first move. A forceful block disarmed the first to strike; the second went reeling as he struck it a glancing blow on its helm. He was just settling his strategy in his mind when something smote him on the shoulders. The something felt like a body—a real one this time. It was not heavy in and of itself, but it had dropped onto or catapulted into him with such force that it knocked the air from his lungs. He sensed a repositioning, felt the shift in weight that said not one but two weapons were about to be brought to bear on a part of his body he could not easily defend. *Only one thing to do*, he thought. He twisted to his right, then threw his entire weight into a furious twist to the left, whirling forcefully about his own center as he did so. The pressure on his back relieved, he whirled again to see the creature that had jumped him go flying into the remaining three phantom opponents.

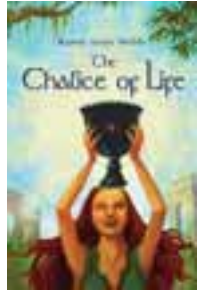
The phantoms again vanished, whether because his attacker had impacted them or because Torreb had halted the program, Mosaia was unsure. His attacker, however, tucked, rolled, and showed no sign of vanishing back into the Ether. Gracefully regaining her feet, she posed with daggers drawn and ready.

“Habariah!” Mosaia and Torreb cried together.

She postured down and burst out laughing at the discomfited looks on both their faces. “Please, it’s Habie to my friends!” She sobered suddenly. “We *are* friends?”

“I would have said yes,” returned Mosaia, “till you attacked without provocation and with no defiance sent.”

“Oh, come on. Didn’t you just say you were trying to hone your edge? It looked like Torreb was taking it too easy on you, so I decided to help you out.”



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"I gave him five opponents like he asked," Torreb pointed out.

"Yeah, but I saw you dial this back just as they materialized." She walked over to the console and tapped a dial labeled "intensity."

Torreb looked sheepish. "Well, I guess a priest, even one dedicated to a god of war, is a healer first and foremost. The dictum 'First, do no harm' is almost a universal constant whether the healer uses the Art or the Disciplines or mundane means."

"Habadiah, I could have hurt you!" scolded Mosaia. He went down on one knee to address her so they were more nearly eye to eye; en route, he cast Torreb a look so histrionically dark the priest got the message without truly feeling berated.

"Me?" said Habie. "Nah. Street kid, remember? Used to taking hard knocks?"

"Of course," put in Torreb while the two were still sizing each other up, "there is his point about no provocation and no defiance sent." His eyes twinkled a little as he said it.

"'Tis unbecoming in a holy questor, Habadiah," Mosaia said a little more somberly.

"Read my lips, guys. 'Street kid.' Used to hard knocks, unused to courtly refinements. Get used to it." She scrutinized them both. "So, is it 'Habie' or 'Habadiah?'"

Torreb and Mosaia exchanged a humorously chastened glance. "Habie," they said together.

"Good, 'coz I was gonna ask what you two were doing in here. Dja get sick of hanging out in the chapel praying?"

"We *are* trying to prepare ourselves for whatever rigors this quest might present us," offered Mosaia.

"Why?" asked Torreb. "Have you been putting your time to better use?"

"You bet," said Habie. "I've been poking around in the library." She hopped up on the console, sheathing one dagger but gesturing expansively with the other. "See, Mistra told me right after Deneth and I got here about this vision she'd had of the different places the quest would take us."

"Seven mystical portals to seven different adventures," agreed Torreb. He frowned in realization as an idea struck him. "And seven of us. Maybe that's why we're seven rather than nine."

"You're the priest: you'd know stuff about numerology and mysticism better than me. Anyway, Mistra'd seen images of the different places, so I asked her if I could see. I haven't had a lot of training, but Lemurians are natural receptive empaths, so what with her skill at projecting and mine at receiving, I was able to arc those images from her mind to mine. I've been tinkering with all the neat stuff Tuhl keeps in his library to find books or scrolls or anything like that that might give us more information. Then, between us, Mistra and I were able to implant the images fairly well into Alla's mind, so she took a different approach."

"And what was that?"

"She's been meditating—reaching out to the universe, I think is how she said it."

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“And?” the two men prompted together.

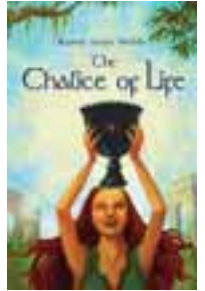
“And what?”

“Have you had any luck?” asked Mosaia.

She screwed up her small face. “I think we were making progress until-er-” She brightened. “Let me put it this way. Ya wanna hear some good gossip?”

“Gossip is unbecoming—” Mosaia began to pontificate.

“In a holy questor,” Habie finished. “Yeah, got it. Street kid lacks refinement, OK? Anyway, it’s not really gossip.” A sense of mute appeal came to her bearing. “It’s Mistra. I think she needs all of us to put our heads together to help her out.”



“I feel I at least have done as much preparing as I can,” T’Cru was saying to Tuhl at about the same time this scene was playing out. “I am anxious to move on to the first Portal.”

Tuhl chuffed a bit at this. He rose from the log where he had been sitting when T’Cru had sniffed him out and stared into the night sky: he might have been looking to the stars for inspiration, or to the Home of Homes itself. Suddenly, he put a hand to his hear as if listening.

T’Cru’s face puckered into a feline frown. “Master Tuhl? What are you doing?”

“Listening.”

“Did you not hear me the first time?”

“I heard you: Tuhl always hears. Now Tuhl is listening.”

The Tigroid cocked his head. “For what?”

“For the sound of four paws bounding toward something rather than away.” Bright eyes turned to T’Cru in a significant look.

Anyone watching T’Cru from a distance would have seen both his expression and his posture change several times. While his haunches remained firmly planted on the ground, his neck and head backed slightly as if in confusion. Next his great shoulders tensed; the grimace that came to his face said he was considering springing. Then he simply slouched like a full sail when the wind suddenly drops. His proud head drooped in abject misery.

Tuhl, who had remained motionless and apparently unperturbed by all of this, now approached T’Cru and stroked his glossy fur in sympathy. “Important it is for a holy questor to be running toward his goal rather than away from his problems.”

“The Stag,” said T’Cru, and his voice was husky. “That it appears in white still shames me. I know it shouldn’t, but it does.”

“Deserted you, your egalitarian leanings have,” the sage cackled. “Striving to change society is always easiest in the third person—`We must give *them* equal rights’ rather than `We demand equal rights for all of *us*.’ Easiest when you are the one in the position to give, and when on the highest rungs of society’s ladder you find yourself.”

T’Cru’s head snapped up; his eyes blazed. Then he saw himself

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through the sage's eyes and began laughing as well. "It was easy to believe in the equality of all our castes when I bore a coat that was the envy of even members of our nobility. Believing in equality was consonant with Minissa's wishes. It seemed—benevolent."

"And now it seems an act of desperation?"

"Yes, exactly. I feel like it will look like I favor it only so doubt is not cast on my own position as crown prince. I know that sounds paradoxical, but..." He shrugged.

Tuhl pondered. "Prince T'Cru, in all my long life, I sometimes feel I have learned only one thing, but very well have I learned it."

"Yes?" His ears flicked forward.

"That the road that looks shortest when seen from its end often looked longest from its middle. I think that dictum can apply to societies as well as to individuals."

"You think this is Minissa's way of moving my society along its own best path?"

"Sometimes the best way of moving society along is encouraging growth in its leaders."

"If growth this is, it is more painful than I could have imagined."

"Then you are in good company," he said, and turned as if expecting someone else to join them. Seconds later, they heard footsteps coming along the path from the caves. "Ah," he laughed as Habie, Torreb, Mosaia, and Alla stepped into the pool of firelight, "I was expecting a suffering companion or two with whom you could commiserate, but here are not companions but an entire delegation!"

"Please," said Alla, who seemed to have been elected spokesperson. "It's Mistra."

"Something about her's been driving the men—the -er- *human* men—buggy," Habie dived in, cutting Alla off in her enthusiasm. "And now she's kicking out so much psychic turbulence she's starting to drive me 'n' Alla buggy, too, and we'd help if only we knew how only we don't so since she said you know everything about everything, we thought maybe you'd know something we don't and could help us out."

"We'd help if only we knew how, but even Mosaia and I are stumped," added Torreb. "We're both healers, but there's nothing there to be healed."

T'Cru made a rasping sound in his throat—it took them a moment to figure out he was laughing. "I guess this was bound to happen. I should have been concentrating on the problems of the rest of you rather than on my own."

"You *knew*?" This from Habie, and it was almost an accusation.

"My species relies as much on scent as on hearing and sight to survive. It was obvious to me the moment I arrived that she was entering this vital period women of her race contend with periodically."

"*And you didn't say anything?*" Definitely an accusation here.

"There seemed to be little to say. Really, there seemed to be little to *do*. It is a normal biological process in the women of the race of Thalybdenos, at least on Caros. But with the clear hindsight Tuhl has just reminded me we all develop as we reach the end of our road, since you men are from Ereb

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and Thalas and from completely off-world, problems were bound to occur. I think the psychic turbulence will take care of itself if you—excuse me, that’s self-centered—if *we* deal with the rest.” A reflective smile came to his face. “Mistra and I have known each other since we were cubs. She is a fine logician, capable of damping down all emotion till she finds the solution to a problem she’s working on.” He sighed. “But when she feels, she feels with such passion she is likely to affect everyone—and everything—around her.”

“So what do we do?”

“What has she tried?” asked Tuhl.

“Well, she figured out the problem all right,” said Habie. “Working with Deneth at arm’s length—he was serenading her part of the time, just offering her encouragement the rest—she concocted something that would break up this stuff that’s driving the guys buggy. But putting it to practical use is where she’s stuck. They’ve tried a soap, they’ve tried a mouthwash and something that she inhales, they’ve even tried an amulet. But no luck. Deneth almost hyperventilated himself into a faint a few times, and I thought Mistra was going to have to turn him into a newt or a block of ice at one point.”

“They let you watch?”

“Well, no, not exactly.” She felt the scrutiny of ten eyeballs. “Look, I’ve stayed alive and sane for 18 years by keeping my eyes and ears very, very open, and not waiting to open them till I get an explicit invitation from the people I’m watching, OK? ‘Sides, I figured it was to help a friend.”

“Mistra did seem to feel pretty mortified about telling even Habie and me what little she told us,” said Alla.

“It does seem to be a matter of great weight to the Carotians,” said T’Cru. “There seem to be Women’s Mysteries they don’t discuss in front of their men, or maybe Personal Mysteries Carotians of either gender discuss with very few. This is one. I must say when those Mysteries involve marriage and family and the procreative act, their behavior is a source of much amusement to my folk.”

“Do you know of a solution?”

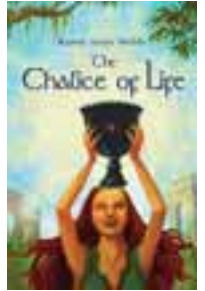
“Not unless one of you men is prepared to offer her marriage and begin a family. Perhaps my humor is misplaced: to Carotians, this vital year their women go through and the taboos associated with it are as much a matter of things of the spirit as of the body. Rumor among my folk is that if a woman begets a child during that time without having bonded to a male of her race, all three of them can die.”

“Yeah, I guess this stuff she’s kicking out by the gallons makes sure there are a lot of men willing to help with the begetting part,” Habie said a little sourly.

“I believe I can help,” Tuhl said into the silence that followed.

FROM HABIE’S JOURNAL:

(Let’s get this straight. I don’t actually keep a journal, but Peri—she’s this cute little Chronicler lady who’s writing about the quest—asked for



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my thoughts here and there and asked if she could put them into the text as “Habie’s Journal.” And she seems pretty nice, so I said OK as long as she didn’t pretty it up to make me sound sophisticated like T’Cru or Mosaia. I figure us indigenous races have to stick together. —Habie)

That Tuhl guy is OK for someone who buys into all this mumbo-jumbo about The Promise Of Our Race. I’d call him a know-it-all only except he’s not real stuffy about what he knows: he uses it to help people. And he sure helped Mistra. And by helping her, he helped all the rest of us, ‘coz we were still dancing around each other and being polite and feeling each other out. Helping Mistra was our first chance to see we could do things as a team. Which is good in case we run into a dragon or an army of zombies or something the minute we get through this Portal thing.

He assigned us all tasks. Alla’s and mine was to figure out exactly how this stuff—he says the right name is “hormone,” which sounded funny to me but also like I might have had my mouth washed out with soap when I was younger for saying it—was getting out of her body. I had this goofy image that we’d find something like the mouth of a bottle somewhere that we could just stick a cork in.

But that image didn’t turn out to be all that goofy. I saw why he sent Alla and me to do this bit, ‘coz we had to have her undress. Really, her figure is pretty streamlined from all that dancing, and we mostly had to do this in the dark, but this definitely wasn’t the time to go parading her in front of even a guy like Mosaia who says he’s taken this vow of chastity.

So, in the dark it turned out that Alla and I see slightly different things, and between her seeing heat gradations and my seeing this curly kind of distortion that Tuhl says means I see in a slightly different visual range in the dark, we found an actual pore at the nape of Mistra’s neck where this *hormone*—there, I said it without laughing—was leaving her body. Nowhere else, just this pore. So I guess that’s why the soap and all the other stuff didn’t work.

Now here’s the clever bit. Tuhl was able to create this thing like a little bead and gunk it up with this stuff Mistra found to break the hormone up; then he was able to enchant it so the stuff would renew itself for as long as Mistra is dumping the hormone. So I said, “But wait a minute, doesn’t that mean it’s like sticking a cork in a bottle that’s holding a gas that’s building up pressure, like when you stick baking soda and vinegar together?” And he said nope, he made the bead thing so the hormone can get out, it’ll just be released after its been chewed up by this stuff Mistra concocted in the lab. I have to say that right about here I was feeling sorry for worlds I’ve read about where they only have magic or only have this good technology like we have around here. (Mistra says the Carotians and Erebiters get both because they follow this Ethic thing and their gods think they can handle it.)

Tuhl also found a way to make a potion for the guys that would dull them to the effects of the hormone while they worked. Yup, they were the ones that had to go into the room with Mistra, kind of like going into a rabid manticore’s den. But Torre and after him Mosaia are the real big-time magical healers, and Deneth can do stuff with his lute that helps you focus better so anything you do with empathy or the Art or the Disciplines or

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whatever it is Mosaia uses, you do faster and better. T’Cru stood by, ready to pounce in case the potion wore off too soon on anybody.

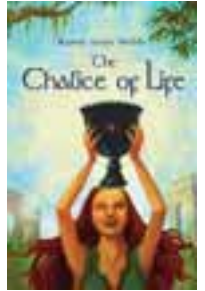
Result—Mistra no longer needs a whip and a chair if she so much as stands upwind of one of the guys. Poor thing, though. She was so completely beside herself that everyone had to know about it and—worse—help to fix things that I had to give her a real stiff talking to. Heck, what I really did was bully her. “Look,” I said, “you tried on your own and you got close. But you need things done that you can’t do alone, and there’s a bunch of people here who care enough about you and about this stupid quest not failing before it even gets off the ground to want to help. Do you know how often I’ve seen people who were willing to go this far out of their way to help someone when there’s nothing in it for them?” I held up both closed fists, not as a threat, but to mean precisely zero. “Now, you and your relatives talk a pretty good game; are you gonna make it seem like talk is all it was by putting your precious little sensibilities and taboos and your pride and everything ahead of doing what’s sensible and right?”

Alla tried to shut me up here by saying, “Habie! Really, to her people, this amounts to a great violation.” That’s Alla, really—wise and sympathetic and sometimes missing the point entirely. As if any of these guys have a clue about what violation really is! I mean, I saw her point, but what I said was, “Alla, she’s acting like we’re not good enough for her.” Mistra looked pretty miserable at this point—she was crying, in fact—but she said that wasn’t it at all, and I finally said, “Mistra, it’s time to ante up, ‘coz if you can’t, then it *was* all just talk, and I say the hell with you.”

That wised her up...

Mistra, in describing the same events, kept the detail to a minimum. She did note, however, that, while she was thankful she was no longer affecting the men, the drive to find a bondmate had not slackened at all in herself. “A month ago,” she wrote, “I would have said I was the last woman in the world to find the thews of a warrior (and Mosaia and, to a lesser extent, Deneth have thews enough to equip a contingent of Trun Guards) so mortally attractive in and of themselves. I feel doomed, for all three men have more than looks to commend them. All the depth and intellect and skill and kindness I found appealing in my consorts, these fine men have in plenty. I think my steed of pain just threw a shoe, and there are now several gaping rents in my mantle of denial. I would laugh about it all if only the nightmares weren’t growing steadily worse. I see the foul images even in my moments of prayer...”

Two days had passed since the party had effected its cure on Mistra when all seven were smitten with a sense that their sojourn in the peace and safety of Tuhl’s wood was about to end. For the entire afternoon, they put merriment aside in favor of pursuing the activities that would best prepare them to move on. Alla returned to her meditations. Habie, although she spent some time practicing with the phantom opponents in the combat room, went back to perusing the materials in the library. Torreb



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and Mosaia, who were dividing their time equally between combat practice, prayer, and study, encountered her there periodically.

Mistra, who split her time in a way similar to Mosaia and Torreb, made sure she also spent a few minutes alone with each of the men to make sure there were no lingering effects of the pheromone. Mosaia finally admitted to her his fear of having been bewitched; the laughter the admission occasioned finally broke the ice between them. Deneth had a similar exchange with Alla and Habie, both of whom still took delight in his company but were pleased they could do so without feeling like they wanted to throw themselves at his feet and beg him to let them be the mothers of his children.

The bard absented himself right after these two brief encounters. The story he gave them later was that, rather than engaging in combat or study or musical practice, he had gone apart chiefly to confront the Pantheon and give them a final chance to come to their senses regarding his election to the quest. This assertion netted him a few skeptical remarks, but Mistra and Habie exchanged a knowing smile.

Tuhl supped with them that evening, then asked them to join him once more in the chamber that housed the Well of Eliannes. When they had assembled, he struck the floor once with his staff, then pointed it toward the Well. From the Well, a rainbow shot forth and arched high overhead. There in its light shimmered a vision of Eliander as Mistra had first seen him in the fire of the grand council chamber of her father's court, when she had first known that this quest was her destiny. He lay, sleeping or entranced, on a stone block encased in crystal in a woodland crypt. He was clad as if for the hunt. His face was very fair: even in repose, he looked kind and noble. Those skilled in the arts of magic and healing could feel that here was a mighty practitioner of these and of many other goodly crafts and skills besides—a true child of Thalybdenos in the days when the Exodus still lived in waking memory and the faithful wielded powers about which the Carotians and Erebiters of these latter days could only dream.

"Listen, Chosen of Minissa!" Tuhl intoned as they looked on rapt. "Pause and reflect! Seven mystical Portals will you pass ere you come to Eliander's resting place outside this world; seven strange adventures must you undertake before you see the first hope of rescuing him. So much has Minissa revealed to Mistra in her visions, but no more. Death and the peace of the gods may be your only rewards for undertaking the Quest of the Lost Prince. The death of any one of you will diminish the party's chance for survival and success if you fail to guard one another well once you are underway. Not so if you refuse the quest completely and turn aside now. Does each of you purpose to go on after the horrors of Mistra's vision?"

"I will go," Mistra said quietly. "I must."

"And I," said Mosaia, "for the honor of your stricken prince. To rescue such a one on behalf of a goodly world and its gods, especially if evil move to prevent us, is a worthy act."

"I will go," said Alla, "for love of Minissa."

Mistra looked at her and smiled. "Your folk don't even worship our gods." It was wonder, not accusation.

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“Don’t they?” asked Tuhl. “Minissa has judged otherwise.”

Mistra bent her head, chastened.

“I’ll go,” said Deneth. “Can’t have Caros and Ereb and Falidia showing up Thalás, and he’s more *my* king than he is anyone else’s.”

“I must go as Mistra must,” said Torrebb, “for I believe not only Minissa but Erebb has bidden me.”

“I, too,” said T’Cru, “will go for love of Minissa. My folk owe a debt of honor to Mistra’s family, and, through them, to every planet in the Union. If the Tigroids can make peace with the humans on Caros, we must see to it that all of the humans in the Union make peace with one another!”

Habie looked up at the others. “I—I never had a home before, or a family,” she said, and faltered. She looked grateful when Mistra knelt and took her hand, when Alla nodded to show confidence that she could carry on and Deneth winked as if to say he knew she had something of value to impart. “I’ve had few friends, and not much to do except get by. And that’s not a good reason to go, I know, but—you’re the first people who have ever been kind to me (or even consistently civil). It’s like you *are* my home and my family, and if it’s because of your Minissa, then maybe there’s something to all this talk of gods and magic and quests.”

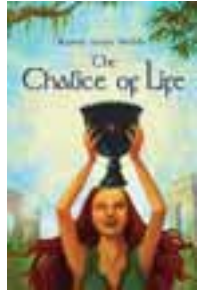
Tuhl permitted them a moment of quiet fellowship before he stepped to the edge of the well. He waved his staff again, and the image of Eliander dissipated before a radiance that flowed upward from the Well itself. It flowed until a complete hemisphere of light had formed above the depression in the floor. The Well of Eliannes was now a complete sphere, half above the ground, half below. And there, one by one, the gifts of the Pantheon to the questors materialized.

For Deneth, there was an exquisite 12-course lute of workmanship far superior to the one he already carried. With it went a case that would have been too small for a cittern, yet the lute—through a trick of magic or trans-dimensional physics—fit it perfectly. He took them with a display of reverence totally at odds with his usual deportment. He asked no question but looked wide-eyed at Tuhl.

“Many new powers you will find with this instrument,” the sage explained. “Control rock, wind, fire, things that grow from the bosom of the earth; protect your friends; enchant even the most powerful of foes. Man and woman alike will respond, but at your discretion,” he added, cackling gleefully as he saw Deneth’s discomfiture at the reference to his recently-abated curse and the circumstances of its removal.

For Torrebb, there appeared a hand-tooled mahogany case lined in velvet. Within lay two brocaded pouches. Inside one were four tapers of purest white. Inside the other was a gold medallion inscribed with the Balance of Erebb. He frowned, and then nodded in recognition as he handled them. “I will use them well, Master Tuhl,” he said. “I thank you.”

Tuhl himself reached up to take the next gift, for it was intended for T’Cru. “Strange paths you will tread,” Tuhl told the great feline. “You have not the resistance to weapons and magic of some of your companions.” He held up the gift—a golden collar set with gems—so that it flashed and sparkled in the light of the Well of Eliannes, then fastened it around T’Cru’s



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neck. The great feline preened a bit. “This will shield you, and you will fight the more fiercely and discern friend from enemy the more wisely while you wear it.”

He gestured next to Alla, whose gift was an amulet on a thin silver chain. When she cocked her head at him in query, he explained, “When your folk are greatly wearied, even the wisest and most skilled have little control over the shape they assume while the body sleeps and the spirit roams free. Not a problem in your own woodland dwellings, to fall asleep in the shape-shifted state and wake in other form, but on the quest, it could prove deadly.”

Alla took the amulet, though she flushed a little at his comments.

“Alla?” Torreb asked, seeing her struggle to suppress the wave of embarrassment. “What distresses you so?”

She turned on him a look of thankfulness that he had broached the subject. “There are things—Mysteries—that we do not easily discuss with outsiders.” She shifted her solemn gaze to Mistra, then to Deneth, and her manner softened. “But others before me have endured what it cannot have been easy to have revealed and dealt with by the rest of us. I think we must accustom ourselves to viewing one another as Habie said—as family, perhaps as the only family any of us will be able to claim while the quest lasts.” And she took Mistra’s hand in one of hers and Deneth’s in the other and squeezed while her gaze widened to embrace the entire party.

There next appeared mail of supple leather and a great two-handed broadsword sheathed in a rune-traced scabbard. Mosaia, for whom the items were obviously meant, turned to Tuhl and said, “I came prepared. My arms and armor have been with me since I was knighted.”

Tuhl clucked his tongue. “No adventure like this have you been on! No arms like these have you seen! Take them.”

Still he hesitated. “Are they magicked? ‘Tis an impeachment to a knight’s honor to triumph by aught else but his skill alone.”

“All things touched by the gods are what you would call magicked. The armor is light like silk, but will turn the sharpest blade, be it wielded even by the strongest champions of the nether regions. Were you to battle such ilk, it would be no more than the justice of Ereb that you have such protection, for the best knight of Falidia cannot have received training that would prepare him to face such foes and live, no matter how high his heart or how fearsome his sword arm. The sword is a Holy Retributor, forged in the deeps of time by Ereb himself, though there are those who say that Phino and Strephele had a hand in its making as well.” His mouth quirked into a grin. “You will be better able to judge which of the myths is true once you have wielded it.” Mosaia bowed and took the things from the Well, although, being unfamiliar with the Pantheon and their various domains, he was puzzled by the references to Phino and Strephele, whom he knew only as patrons of other members of Mistra’s family.

Habie looked disappointed when nothing else appeared for a moment, and only slightly less so when a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles popped up. She took them but gave Tuhl a disgruntled look, as if she felt he had connived with the universe to cheat her.

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"Hmph!" he grunted. "Take them! Take them! For you are in need of discernment!"

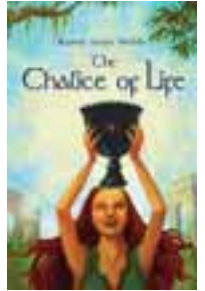
She tried them on. Her eyes, made to seem large by the thick lenses, widened in truth when she began to scrutinize things near her. "Ooh!" she gasped. "I see tiny little things!" She had never owned anything magical before, and she suddenly saw the advantage of such a tool in furthering her craft!

"Yes. Things tiny and things well-concealed: traps, trip wires, the smallest of wounds, things hidden in the Ether. Use them well, little thief of hearts, and you may find you need thieve no longer." He turned last to Mistra. "Come, daughter of Strephan and Amina."

Long and arduous had been Mistra's preparation to use the artifact whose power would free Eliander once they reached him: a sword of lineage so obscure and strange that its story would have raised eyebrows even in the Union. But its story, its powers and their usage were secrets guarded more closely than the specifics of the quest itself. The conclusions Deneth had drawn from Bradys' information and his own researches had been accurate, as far as they went: the spells that would free the sword's powers were so complex and the need for speed and secrecy so urgent that the information had had to be imparted to Mistra by extraordinary means. The Art and the Disciplines, technology, prayers, music, and environmental controls supplied by the members of the Councils of all three worlds—all had played their role so that she might absorb the information directly from the sword itself, as if it were speaking to her. There had been further protections, including spells that had rendered the sword out of phase unless Mistra herself came within its area of enchantment while in her magically induced trance, so she had never come in contact with it in waking life. Ariane and Tuhl had arranged to have it transported to his wood the instant Mistra had learned the last syllable of the last spell needed to activate it. And here it had remained under Tuhl's watchful eye.

Mistra had never asked Tuhl if she might see it. Even after having been made to absorb such a volume of information by enchantment, though, she had spent several score hours in Tuhl's library before her comrades turned up, studying what was needful of the artifact's lineage, of its forging and history, of the lore that surrounded it. That there existed so much more material to absorb after all those torturous hours of preparation gave her an idea just how complex were the spells whose casting and use she had learned. Week upon week of study—indeed, a lifetime of preparation—and none of it had readied her for the impact of beholding the sword for the first time with her waking vision.

The sword materialized over the Well as she stepped forward, a great leaf-shaped blade circumscribed by the body of a two-headed serpent whose necks met and crossed just beneath the quillions. It was a thing of immense age and vast power. More, the power it possessed was a wild one that knew nothing of good or evil, law or ethic. It should have been untamable, but, once tamed, it might have had the strength to cast planets from their orbits or to pry the light loose from a black hole. For a long moment, she could do no more than stare at it, utterly transfixed. Her



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doom was at hand, and it was more weighty than she had ever imagined. She felt in no way either prepared or worthy to meet it. Taking up the sword would bring that doom inexorably down upon her; there would be no turning back though she remained safe in Tuhl's wood for an age of the world.

"Here is Dyrnwyn," Tuhl went on, seeing the sword's effect on her and seeking to give her time to acclimate, "the Sword of Rhydderch Hael, said to pour forth flame invincible in the hands of the valiant. It was forged in another time on another world, and its true secret is far more subtle and complex. Know, all of you, that throughout its whole long history, its Guardian has managed to move it from place to place so it arrives *where* its power is needed *when* it is needed. Mistra is the only one who will be able draw on its powers. Only *its* power will free Eliander from his long sleep. Take it, Mistra, and assume the responsibility for its use."

"Or leave it," she whispered, still not daring to grasp it, "and forbear for all time the use of its power?"

"Yes."

She paused as if debate still raged within her: she had never before allowed herself to contemplate what that rush of power might feel like, how its lure might draw her. A thrill ran around the room; for a moment, as she stretched out her hand, she saw herself through her companions' eyes. Awe, fear, reverence, the sense that she had grown to enormous proportions, that a light too bright and beautiful to bear was suddenly emanating from her every pore—she perceived all of that and more. She found it odd almost to the point of levity that they should feel these things as they looked at her: she had never felt smaller or more insignificant in her life! No, serving as the repository for such power would not tempt her to overstep herself. At that moment, she felt she would be lucky merely to survive serving as its vessel!

With a nod of conviction, she closed her hand around Dyrnwyn's hilt. At that first touch, she felt an intoxicating strength sweep through her. As she drew it from the Well, words unbidden came to her mind; as she brandished it, the sounds broke free, and her voice was the thundering voice of the One on the Day of Creation, chanting in the primal rhythm that had brought life forth from the Void:

*"Eliander, beh
ma shoma amadan!"*

"Eliander, to you we come!" she cried in the language of a Thalybdenos so ancient that evil had not yet tainted the universe. And the others, who knew not the strange tongue, took up the cry one by one and repeated it again and again. With each repetition, the cry became louder and more forceful till the very walls of the chamber shook and the rumor of their cheering reached even to the Home of Homes.

That night they all dreamed vividly.
Deneth dreamed of a topsy-turvy castle. He—maybe all of them, it was

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hard to tell in dreams—was running through the place accompanied by some influential creature. Pursuit followed close behind. He could hear a Klaxon. Down they went, down many long flights of stairs till they arrived at their destination—a landing port on the very floor from which they had embarked. But that was silly.

Torreb dreamed of a beautiful jeweled chalice, something he knew to be holy, though it was not consecrated to any deity in the pantheon he served. There was something about its surroundings, though, that didn't fit. He envisioned it in a ruin of some sort—not necessarily an abandoned temple, but a place equally dilapidated, a once-mighty edifice crumbling into dust. He saw a party searching it for some reason other than worship or Adventure. But that was incongruous.

Habie dreamed of a fantastic world where creatures who commanded the winds themselves dwelt. There were palaces more magnificent than the one in Caros City and beings who flew through the air the way she would walk on the ground. But that was fanciful.

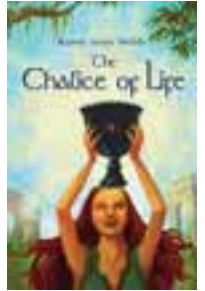
Alla, who had spent a long life in harmony with the rhythms of life, dreamed of a place of death. Still, it was a physical place, not one beyond the rigors of the material world, as she had expected. There was a mysterious barge ferried by an even more mysterious boatman, and a three-headed dog the size of an elephant, a king—not evil, but stern—and a beautiful, sad-eyed queen. There was one who didn't belong somehow—or who thought he didn't—although the king and queen seemed to think otherwise. He seemed to be trying to contravene the will of the gods. But that was futile.

Mosaia dreamed of two young lovers separated by a powerful enchantment. He sighed in his sleep. How peculiar, he thought, that he should be dreaming of the two elements that had never held meaning in his life: magic and love. The most peculiar thing was that he felt that, of all the party, he was the one who had to understand why they must be reunited and move to unravel the enchantment that kept them apart. But that was impossible.

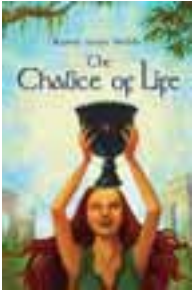
T'Cru dreamed of what he knew was an entirely different planet in a system far away. Only the humans there spoke, yet they worshiped beings in form like unto him. They bowed to him, not even noticing the imperfection in his coat once he spoke. But that was unthinkable.

Mistra had perhaps the darkest dreams of all, for they involved races of demons and gnomes and strange amphibian-men who dwelt entirely apart from the light of day. Held captive in their realm, she was choked as much by the want of the sun and a fresh breeze as she was by the overwhelming sense of malice exuded by the very walls. She saw a demon prince whose life and blood were tainted both by human ancestry and the curse of a woman wronged. Worst of all, she saw Syndycyr at work in his laboratory and knew somehow that his fate was bound up with hers, with Eliander's, with that of all of them.

And that was terrifying.



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In another part of the cosmos, twelve benevolent deities held council. They had been watching the history of the Union unfold since the Great Day of Creation, when they and their brothers, their servants and children had assisted the One in the great work of fashioning the universe. They had shepherded the races of the Union along from infancy to glorious maturity, contenting themselves in the beginning with revealing themselves only indirectly through prophets and oracles, then progressing little by little till the day they could reveal themselves in their splendor. And on the day that their children had attained that readiness to gaze unaided on the naked glory of the gods made flesh, those children had come to know the powers that guarded their worlds as the great dualities given form and substance. The powers were bringers of life and death, teachers of wisdom and craft, makers of the very bones of the physical world, sanctifiers of mirth and the joyous union of souls.

The home the deities shared with those who had departed the mortal frame resembled an ongoing panorama of parkland and formal gardens. At least, that was what a sentient creature from the Union saw when it visited the Home of Homes in spirit, and the image suited the Pantheon well. The members of that august assemblage drifted now in ones and twos into the garden that was home to Minissa. The garden held a gazebo and a topiary, but most of the flowers and trees within grew wild, or were at most tended rather than cultivated. The shiest of woodland creatures roamed the place boldly and without fear. Set somewhat incongruously in this pastoral scene was what could have only been a game board, but the like of it had never been seen in the mortal realm. A mortal craftsman could maybe have produced the substance of which it was made, a material that shone with the gloss of polished marble. But only Dorlas the Maker could have wrought the delicate fleecy edges that swirled and drifted so the shape of the board changed constantly, or crafted the pieces that were so cunningly designed in the likenesses of the questors.

“My beloved child thinks your sense of humor is somewhat twisted, cousin,” Minissa greeted Strophel, “to have collaborated in the choice of such a unique party of questors.” The god of humor and Jester to the Pantheon merely chuckled.

“The point,” rumbled her husband Bronys, Judge of the Dead, “is that she has at last set her feet on the path we purposed her to tread. She departed this realm longing for no other fate.”

“And it is not her fault that her doom has barely overtaken her,” said Eliannes the Dreamer. “Its hour was set ere her soul was brought forth by the One from the Great Void.”

“She has used well the time,” added Thalys, Mover of the Elements. “If only those on the world that bears my name had used the time as well, our case would not now be so desperate. Yet neither she nor they knew that this hour long-prepared would come during their lifetimes.”

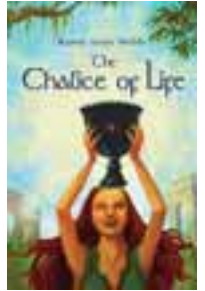
“Her memories will return when the time is right,” Arayne, Lady of

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KAREN ANNE WEED

Mercy assured them.

Together, Thalass and Eliannes assembled the pieces and arrayed them, and Erebus, Lord of Justice, placed before them the figures of a great tree and an archway—the first Portal.

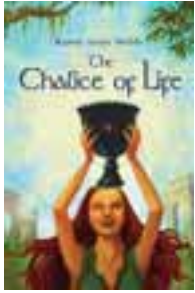


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CHAPTER 5



Beyond the Orb of CAROS

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“One of my favorite passages from the Book of Wisdom is this: “You are going to travel far away. Have you any provision for the journey?” I don’t think it’s referring to a little jaunt through the Asteroids.”

—Avador, High King of the Carotian Union

Tuhl gathered the group of questors together after breakfast the next morning. The pensiveness had lifted. They had lingered over coffee and tea telling each other of their dreams. Although several of them wondered if Alla’s meditations and Habie’s meanderings through the library might have influenced their dreams, the sheer absurdity of what most of them had seen soon had them laughing and snapping their fingers at the thought that they might be heading off to face insurmountable dangers. Even the horror of the vision they had seen through Mistra’s eyes over the Well of Eliannes seemed remote, almost irrelevant. Surely they would be finished with their adventures and heading home with Eliander in tow before the week was out!

“It is time to begin,” Tuhl announced. He tapped his staff on the floor of the audience chamber where they had gathered. Seven packs—one modified for T’Cru’s use—appeared. They were fully provisioned with food, money, and various bits of useful paraphernalia. “Magical they are,” Tuhl continued. “Blessed by Dorlas herself. Tuned in to the needs of the worlds

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to which each Portal leads you. Contents will change from place to place.”

“That’s a handy little trick,” Deneth commented as he rummaged through his pack and puzzled over its contents.

“Yes,” Tuhl agreed. “The currency you find will not make you rich, but you will have money and goods sufficient to prosecute your task. Obstacles will arise—how could they not?—but always there will be a way through if you seek for it together. Know that. Believe it.” And before anyone could respond, he turned abruptly and marched from the audience chamber.

As they exited the caverns into the growing light, Tuhl suddenly accelerated his pace. Mistra actually had to struggle to catch up with him, he moved with such speed. “Where are we going?” she asked him.

“Up.”

“Up?”

“To the Meadow,” was all he would say. All of them heard the capitalization. Only Mistra, Torreb, and T’Cru knew what he was talking about, and only Mistra had ever seen the place. The impact of the simple statement, however, was such that all seven of them felt as if they had been told that they were going to a rendezvous with the entire Pantheon. The prospect was at once thrilling and a little scary.

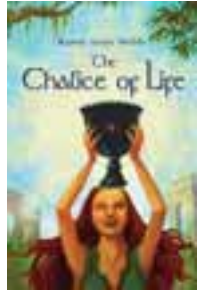
“In the Meadow,” Mistra explained, since Tuhl was showing no inclination to do so, “is a great tree—the Great Tree—and under the tree lies—” Her eyes sparkled. Her breath caught in her throat; the smile she flashed them contained unshed tears of joy, the sort of tears she might have shed had she received a word of praise from her patroness Minissa. “—lies the Orb of Caros.”

A hum arose as they repeated this last amongst themselves. The wooded slope up which Tuhl was leading them was sufficiently steep that the exertion left them with little breath for speech, but the phrase had that sort of effect. They could not help but roll the words around in their mouths and give voice to their thoughts. If the thought of the Meadow made them feel the Pantheon might manifest, the thought of the Orb made them anticipate the arrival of the One Himself. To think of either as merely sacred would be to profane them and the Hand that had placed them here, for they went beyond holy. Mosaia, a stranger to the Union, could sense that the moment the words left Mistra’s lips. Deneth, who maintained that he was a stranger to the Pantheon, could feel the air around him throb with power at their mention.

“Then the Tree and the Orb exist in this world?” asked Mosaia. He had read about the Orbs in Tuhl’s library but had assumed they were a metaphor of some sort.

“Have you seen it, Mistra?” asked Alla, who had long known the lore of the Orbs but had never sought to come in contact with the one on Ereb. That she sensed the presence and power of the Orb of Ereb had been enough—till now.

“Is it really magical?” asked Habie, who had also done some reading in Tuhl’s library but remained skeptical. How, she wondered, could a big hunk of rock mediate the powers she had seen wielded by the High Queen and others at court?



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“Can mortal look upon it and live?” asked T’Cru, for whom the legends of the Orb had always stirred a vague sense of dread. The command of heart and bone and sinew he could understand; becoming a vessel for a power he could neither hear nor see nor touch was more than he could comprehend.

“Do you feel as if you’re in the presence of the gods themselves?” Torreb asked. Underpinning the simple reverence in his manner was the suggestion that a lifetime of willing servitude to his patron had not prepared him for such a meeting but that, if she answered in the affirmative, he would stride forward eagerly to meet his doom, his heart soaring high with the prospect.

To all of which Mistra responded with a breathless “Yes!” When the terrain began to level, she explained—chiefly for Mosaia’s benefit, yet everyone in the party heard something he would long ponder—that the Orbs were the Power that endowed the children of doomed Thalybdenos with the skills that set them apart from nearly every other race in the cosmos. Although the Art was inborn and genetically mediated, the Orbs facilitated its use. The magic, the mentalic healing, the mystical bonding of one heart to another that allowed the very propagation of the race: none could have been honed or refined to such a degree without them. Even the Disciplines, a phenomenon of mind rather than soul, seemed at times subject to one’s ability to draw upon the might of the Orbs.

“That is what we learn,” she finished, “and yet...” Her brow furrowed into a small frown. “It would seem illogical that the Orbs existed on Caros and Ereb only for the sake of the humans when all the humans were living on Thalybdenos. It would seem an arrogant belief that they were placed here in the Beginning so that in some future time, a sentient race with the wherewithal to draw upon their powers would just happen along.” She addressed this to the party as a whole, yet her eyes rested on the back of Tuhl’s head.

“Arrogant indeed,” the sage agreed as if he followed the direction of her gaze clearly and was responding to her unstated question. “Let your logic carry you to its necessary conclusion, if you dare. There is enough truth in your speculations to humble your entire house, great as it is. If you understood every power of every race that calls upon the Orbs to sustain it, knowingly or unwittingly, never would you and yours find reason to be arrogant again!” he finished with a chortle. He kept on walking, but about half of the party drew to a halt for several heartbeats while they pondered his words and their implication.

“Wait a minute,” said Deneth, who surprised them all (including himself) by being the first one to speak. He jogged ahead to draw abreast of the sage, but he projected his voice in the way that only a bard can; the very trees seemed to bestir themselves and take notice. “You mean *all* of us except Mosaia have some gift that relies on the Orbs for realization? Are you saying *I* draw on the Orbs of Caros and Ereb for the effects of my music? And if that’s even possible, what happens if these Portals take us far away in time or—Phino forbid!—space?”

Tuhl made a chuffing noise in his throat. “So afraid are you of becoming common?”

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“Yes!”

Tuhl stopped so suddenly that Deneth nearly ran him over. “Bard of Thalac,” he said solemnly, “look less to your fears and attend to the music of your soul.” He took off again without waiting for a reply; if it were possible, the others would have said his pace had just accelerated, though he showed no sign of exertion.

“He means, friend Deneth,” Mosaia said to the bard, clapping him on the shoulder, “that you would not have been chosen for this quest if you were not fundamentally *uncommon*, extraordinary powers or no.” He frowned thoughtfully at the look Deneth gave him, then went on, “Many men fear to look within only to find a soul more wretched than they ever imagined. *You* have the look of a man who fears to look within and find a soul far greater, and great soul you must have to work your wonders, if Princess Mistra’s explanations be true.”

Mistra noticed the look that said Deneth was once again stuck for a coherent thought and said, “He’s been listening to stories again. Most Thalacians think we think worse of them than we really do.” Her mouth crooked into a half-smile.

“Most Thalacians,” Torreb added with gentle good humor, “think their kin on Caros and Ereb stay up nights debating over whether Thalacians even *have* souls. At least, that was the popular rumor in the seminary where I trained.”

“Most Thalacians,” Deneth rebutted, “would say that souls, like magic, are things given to the weak for playthings to occupy them while real men train for battle, and that miracles are worth every bit of the currency with which they’re purchased.” The self-derogation in his voice warred with the befuddlement in his eyes that said he had just entered waters treacherous to his kind but refused to retreat. He looked bemused for a few more seconds, at the end of which the four of them burst out laughing together. Mosaia gave him a friendly shove to start him walking again, and they hastened up the trail.

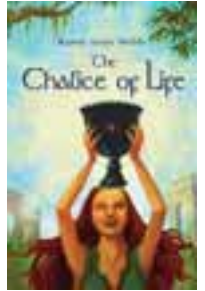
Though it was not yet noon, the sky began to darken as they reached the crest of the mountain above Tuhl’s network of caverns and began the descent. When they came to a clearing and could see that the darkness was growing rather than diminishing, Torreb laid a hand on Mistra’s shoulder. He raised his eyes to the sky, and looked at her in inquiry. She let the rest of the party get a little way ahead, then nodded at his unspoken question.

“So much for him dismissing us,” she whispered, not wanting to alarm the others.

No need for him to ask to which “him” Mistra was referring. Torreb understood Mistra’s reluctance to make such casual use of Syndycyr’s true name: trapped outside normal space-time he might be, but uttering his name might be tantamount to inviting a vampire into one’s home.

“Maybe this is his way of encouraging us to get on with it,” he responded drily.

As they rejoined the others, Habie was querying Tuhl about the occurrence of strange weather patterns within and about his wood. Tuhl reiterated his observation about nothing evil entering his wood without his



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leave and continued on in apparent unconcern. The other seven stared uncomfortably at one another before they followed his lead, then moved forward. They kept in a more tightly knit cluster than they had used while traversing the steepest part of the wooded slopes, and every now and again one of them would cast his eyes heavenward and set a faster pace for the rest.

Still, they drew to a halt by unspoken mutual consent when they came to the edge of the forest near the bottom of the incline. Awe seized them at the vista that spread out before them. Stretching out below them was the Meadow, a broad expanse of grassland ringed with low mountains. Brooks skipped merrily in their courses, wildflowers abounded, and here and there the most fantastical of creatures cavorted with the more mundane.

In the exact center of the Meadow stood the Tree, and none who saw it could in the least question the reason for such an appellation. It was imposing, of great height and such girth that the eight of them clasping hands would not have compassed a tithe of its circumference, nor would the eight of them standing one upon the other's shoulders have reached a tithe of its height. But the source of its grandeur was otherworldly: had it been only the smallest of shrubs, still it would have stood out as a thing of paramount importance, as a tiny diamond might have stood out in a scuttle full of coal. Its branches moved oddly in the mounting wind—at times, the strongest gusts caused barely a ripple, while the branches would shake madly when the wind died.

“Like the Orb that it shelters,” Tuhl commented, noting their puzzled looks, “the Tree lives in its own time and at its own pace.”

Distances were deceptive here, and it took them the better part of an hour to reach the Tree. Tuhl led them around the trunk to a crevice just wide enough for the larger men to squeeze through, and by that time the sky was pitch black. The wind whipped up to gale force. Strange green lightning forked across the sky every few seconds, and the thunder that roared in its wake, when the wind died and permitted them to hear, had an ominous ring to it.

They followed Tuhl—some merely on the faith that he was actually leading them somewhere. Those who doubted joined those who believed in gasping in wonder. Just inside the crevice, there lay a short stairway made of packed earth and tree roots. At its foot sat a spacious chamber whose walls and ceiling were also made of packed earth and tree roots. Its floor, however, was planed marble scribed with runes and inlaid with designs similar to those used in the chambers of the Nonacles. From that floor rose a smooth, silvery grey hemisphere: an upthrusting of the Orb of Caros, the only part of the Orb that existed above ground on the entire planet. It was set so that either it had arisen in the exact center of a circle of scroll work and mystical signs, or else the design had been inlaid around it. It was not in itself a thing of great beauty, but so ineffable was its power and so unutterable its holiness that every eye went to it, and more than one knee bent before it in a spontaneous show of reverence. Here was certainly the Hand of the One made manifest!

Deneth was the first who dared speak, and his voice came out as a

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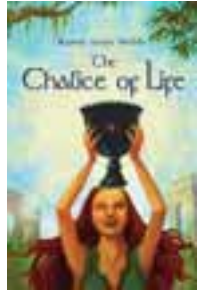
reverent whisper. "It's singing," he said, and it was true. The Orb emitted chord after wondrous chord, each blending seamlessly into the one that followed it. There were no words, but the sound could have as easily been generated by the voices of angels as by mundane instruments. A few of his companions nodded in agreement, but otherwise they listened in motionless silence for a few minutes. It was less the intrinsic quality of the sound that quieted them than that they felt themselves in the presence of the holy. Still, it was not the inaccessible holiness of the One that some of them had anticipated confronting. This holiness was so near to the sentient heart that a willing soul that did but persevere might attain to it: the Orb would sing for them that way of attainment, spelling it out for them in abundant detail if only they had the patience to listen.

It was not an easy thing to speak into the stillness that ensued, but after a long moment of listening and another of pondering, Deneth was again prompted to give voice to his thoughts. He thought he had seen the grand design of the Pantheon when they had created Thalas and its companion worlds, had had the scenes painted clearly in his mind by that ever-changing music, and now he could not rest till he learned if, in this vision, he had seen truly. "Master Tuhl, is there an Orb of Thalas?"

Tuhl regarded him as if, for the first time, he considered that the bard might be salvageable. Deneth met his eyes unflinchingly. Finally, with a nod, he replied, "There is. *All* the worlds have them: Orb of Caros, Orb of Ereb, Orb of Thalas... Orb of Thalas hidden long from the eyes of men. Fewer and fewer exiles called upon its strength, and those who did wished to harness its power only for the malign and perverse. Eventually cloaked itself and went to sleep. Must be found if Thalas is to be all Eliander will wish to make it—found and awakened." He indicated Deneth with the hand that held his staff, and his air of melancholy dissolved into one of mirth. On his face was the look of a master puzzlemaster laughing at the efforts of his very apt pupils to unravel a particularly fiendish riddle he had set them, but laughing in a way that said he knew both that they would find the solution if they applied themselves and that the solution would dazzle them and madden them and make them burst out laughing in appreciation once they had found it. "Maybe *you* will be the one. Maybe *you* will see its voice loosed again."

"We shape the world by our beliefs and make it subject to our power by our words," Deneth murmured. He might have been quoting someone, but he seemed to be rolling the phrase around his mouth (or his brain) as if he were finding new meaning to words he had long ago committed to memory by rote.

Tuhl nodded. "No need is there for those Thalacians gifted and favored by the Pantheon to draw on the Orbs of the other worlds. For those few who serve well and truly, access is granted by the Guardians. For them, the Veil is cast aside." At Deneth's look of protest, he went on in a voice that could not have been overridden by the Horns of Phino, "Do not judge so hastily who serves truly and who not, who serves in humility and who serves for the sake of pride." His eyes twinkled. "How many in the highest echelons of the Emerald Brotherhood could not cause a leaf to fall in autumn with their



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music? And how many in its lowest echelons cause flowers to bloom in deepest winter by their mere presence?"

Not all of them caught the reference to the union of bards, but all of them got the point. Deneth's mouth worked a little as if it were trying to shape a reply with words his brain was just not spewing forth. Try as he might, he could not force the recalcitrant organ to cooperate. Confronted by Tuhl's assertions, his face took on that expression achievable only by the naturally glib when they have been nonplused into silence once too often in too short a time.

Deneth was just getting his bearings—he may even have been about to speak—when the ground above them suddenly quaked. The floor did not waver, but all eight of them lurched crazily at the shock wave generated by the roll of thunder that followed. Through the archway above them came a flickering light. Stunned silence reigned for several seconds, during which they all stood (or sat or lay, depending on the effect the shock wave had had on them) rooted to the spot. Tuhl was the first to recover his feet—and his senses. "The meadow is on fire!" he cried. "You must fly!"

"Where?" shrieked Alla and Mistra together.

"There! Look!" In the reflective silver surface of the Orb, an opaque black window was forming. Upon the lintel taking shape around it stood the figure of the Stag.

"There?" cried Deneth. "Are you crazy?" The roar of the fire reverberated in the chamber.

"Not live this long by being crazy! Go!" He pushed Deneth through, his size belying the force he was able to bring to bear on the larger man. It made no sense—the floor of the chamber still seemed completely level—but the force and leverage he used gave the impression that he had been pushing Deneth up the wall of a gravity well. Sensible or not, it was an effect all six of the remaining questors found themselves contending with. They struggled for what felt like long minutes; Habie and Alla might not have made it to the Portal at all had not Mosaia taken thought to help them.

"What about you?" Mistra called to Tuhl as the others followed Deneth one by one. She stopped as she gained the threshold, determinedly resisting his efforts to push her through the Portal. She gripped his hands between hers as if imploring him to come or to let her stay with him.

"Gods have not called Tuhl yet," he asserted firmly. "But you, young one, and all your friends are summoned to your destinies. Go!"

She looked around wildly. She was the only one left. Still fearing for Tuhl, she released him and stepped through the Portal. As she did so, she felt him push something round and hard into her hands. She had no sense of motion; it felt more like the Portal was engulfing her. There was blackness, then a blinding light, then an interminable fall...

Mistra became aware of several things at once when she came to herself. She had landed on something firm but resilient. She was winded but unharmed. And there was a small, smooth, hard, cold, round object in

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her hand.

Filtered green light fell about her. She sat up and looked around. The others were investigating the woodland glade into which they had been projected—a wood not unlike Tuhl's except that it leaned toward the subtropical. The sun was just clearing the horizon, and the glade was pleasantly cool. A stream bubbled along its perimeter. They might still have been on Caros.

Habie was the first to notice her. She said simply, "Oh, good, you made it," and went about her business.

"What a royal reception," Mistra said tartly.

"Not what you're used to back at the palace, eh?" chuckled Deneth, who was sitting at her head, his lute in his lap. "I'd give you a fanfare, but my instruments are strings, not brass."

"I'm not *used* to anything at the palace. I've been waltzing through time and space for two years making the universe safe for constitutional monarchy. Did I hold you up for very long?"

"No longer than any of the rest. I was alone when I got here; the rest of you just sort of appeared at about five minute intervals. Long enough for those of us who got here earlier to make sure those of you who got here later arrived uninjured."

"He's been moving around singing each of us awake as we got here," said Habie. Her eyes lit with mischief. "And keeping an eye on me, I think, to make sure everyone gets a chance to look in his pack before I start pilfering their contents."

"So far, everyone has pretty much the same collection of oddments," offered Mosaia, "so it would hardly have been worth her while." He scratched Habie affectionately behind the ears.

"Well, here's something you would have missed if you'd checked only my *pack*," said Mistra. Sitting up, she displayed for them the bauble she held. "Look. I felt Tuhl push something into my hands as I went through the Portal. It must have been this."

"Perhaps he meant it as a proposal of marriage," Deneth said with a wry smile, but a look of complete absorption came to his face as his eyes fixed on it.

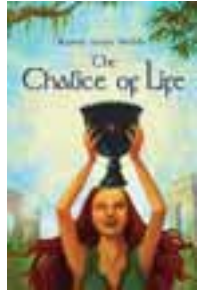
"Nah," said Habie. "Lemurians don't go in for unmounted stones. I don't know about engagement gifts, but I've nicked my fair share of jewelry." And then her eyes lit on the stone and she, too, became transfixed. The rest of them just stared, as if the gem were having the same effect on them as the Orb had had.

Alla was the first to recover. "It looks like a moonstone," she said, and, indeed, its smooth, milky surface had a moonstone-ish quality.

"That would have been some gem mine," breathed Habie, for the gem was nearly the size of a golf ball.

Mistra held it aloft and watched the way it caught the morning sun. It opalesced, and at its heart were multicolored ribbons like tiny rainbows. "I wonder," she murmured, then, aloud, she said, "Bear with me. I have an idea—a little one."

"Your little ideas have been on the mark so far," said Deneth. This



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time, his smile was meaningful and just a little private.

"I think each of us should hold it for a moment."

"Good idea," seconded Torreb. "It may be that, if it has something to do with the quest, it must sensitize to each of us." He held his hand out. Mistra, glad for the show of support, surrendered the stone to him and watched as it passed from person to person. Nothing dramatic happened until it got to Alla, who was last in line. She was facing Mistra when she took the stone; as she took it, it began to glow with a dull fire.

"It likes *Aranyaka* best," laughed Torreb.

She looked abashed. "I doubt that very much. Maybe... maybe someone else should try it again now that we've all been in contact with it."

Mistra felt the shape-changer was looking to her for confirmation, as if she were the resident expert on magic. She hastened to nod agreement.

"OK," said Torreb, taking the stone. It brightened a touch more; he, too, was facing Mistra, at a slightly different angle than Alla was.

Deneth and Mosaia each held it a second time, and T'Cru curled his tail around it—all with varying results. Only Habie, who came to about waist height on the taller humans and, therefore, had a somewhat different perspective on the whole thing, at last noticed the connection between where the stone was and how brightly it glowed.

"You guys," she announced, "it's not who's holding it. It's where it's pointing. Maybe..." She wrinkled her nose. "Maybe it points to our next Portal?"

"Of course!" said Mistra.

"Good thinking, Habie," was Deneth's comment. He took the Portal Stone, held it out, and turned in a wide arc. Its light waxed and waned as he turned, glowing the brightest when he faced south and dulling as he turned toward the north. "Yeah, I'll buy that." He nodded, then looked mystified, as if he realized for the first time what he might be holding in his hands. "How ancient this is," he murmured, "made from the very bones of the universe before time began." He gazed at it, entranced, and then smiled sheepishly at the rest when he noticed the startled looks the recitation garnered. "It's my magnificent soul getting the better of me again," he said in aside to Mistra, who grinned.

Mosaia shouldered his pack. "Since we have what you regard as a clear token of the direction in which we need to go, I suggest we set off at once. The day is fair, the time early. It may be that we can attain the first Portal ere the sun sets. But -er- perhaps our good priest could favor us with a blessing first? Our departure from Tuhl's wood was so precipitous I had no time to suggest it as I wished to."

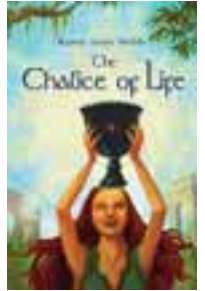
"Nor I!" laughed Torreb. "I became far too absorbed in the mechanics of saving my own skin! But you, too, have taken vows, Lord Clear Water. Might we not hear a blessing from *your* world?" The others joined in the plea.

The paladin felt himself flush a little in delight that they would show such interest. He thought a moment, then said, "This is not from my own scriptures, but from the traditions of the tribal folk who inhabit the great plains not far from my home:

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May the warm winds of Heaven blow softly upon your house.
May the Great Spirit bless all who enter there.
May your Mocassins make happy tracks in many snows.
And may the Rainbow always touch your shoulder.”
And then, amid many words of approbation for the poetic blessing,
they turned south and dived deeper into the wood.



“So there is something to this magic stuff and you guys getting all powered up by these Orbs?” Habie wondered aloud as she fell into step beside Mistra. While no true path led through the woods, the trees stood far enough apart to allow easy passage.

“Well—yeah,” Mistra replied.

“Your sister told me the story of how Eliander’s supposed to be the savior of Thalas in more than politics, but I wasn’t sure I bought it. She even tried to show me a little about res- resa- reso-something—”

“Resonance?” Mistra offered.

“Yeah, that’s it. She broke a glass for me by striking a real loud note on a gong at it. Made me think you guys at court must have to be real careful at state dinners if you use gongs to announce people, but it didn’t really make me buy into this stuff about enough bad intentions breaking up a whole planet. Then, of course, when Tuhl started talking about it, I felt too dumb to say I thought it was rot.”

“Now you know how *I* felt when I brought up the subject of the Orbs powering more than the skills of the humans.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got like *credibility*. You’re a king’s daughter, you’ve made a name for yourself dancing and tinkering. I hear you really were out saving the galaxy for a while these past few years, and people seemed to either tremble or light up around the palace whenever your name came up. *I* wouldn’t have felt too dressed down just by hearing someone like Tuhl say if I thought about something I’d feel real humbled. I still don’t quite get the thing about resonance, though—you know, the way you pull your power from the Orbs making them vibrate some crazy way so they shatter.”

Mistra pursed her lips. In some ways, Habie seemed more ready than the more learned among them to confront the truth of the Mysteries. “I think I wouldn’t have explained it that way,” she said, “although I see what Ariane meant. You know what a vacuum is?”

“Sure.” She made a sucking noise and puckered in her cheeks.

“I think it’s a little more like that. When we draw from the Orbs, we must create something like a metaphysical vacuum, so they take something back from us, or we give something back to them even if we’re not conscious of it. The goodly thoughts that would go along with using magic in harmony with the Ethic...” She paused a beat to ascertain that Habie understood the concept, then went on when the girl nodded. “...would be like air to you and me, or wholesome meat and drink. There *are* entire races in the galaxy that feed on the emotions of others—I’ve encountered them—so it’s not a real stretch for me to see the Orbs as a life form based on some

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other molecule than carbon. By the same token, an evil use of that force would give back—well, bad vibes, for lack of a better term. Enough of those bad vibes and the Orb is poisoned.”

“Yeah, but I thought you guys got your powers taken away if you misused them enough.”

“That assumes there’s a Nonacle in place to do the depriving. It doesn’t just *happen*—that would be like having your brain drop out of your head all by itself for thinking illogical thoughts! And on Thalás, there hasn’t been a Nonacle functioning since—since when, Deneth?”

“Not long after the Exodus is the way I hear it,” said the bard. “Not that there’s been a need for sanctions on that score in recent memory. All of our dabbings with the perfidious and the iniquitous and the treacherous and all the other ous-es you might care to name have been strictly mundane in nature.”

Mistra forbore to go into the one exception that had come as a concomitant of the war. A man from her father’s court had suffered Abrogation for crimes against the state. He had fled Caros for Thalás, but not before stealing a fragment of the Orb of Caros in an attempt to renew the access to the Art of which he had been deprived. He had, frighteningly, succeeded and grown high in the favor and counsels of the late Thalacian King. It opened up the subject of there being ways to get around a sanction imposed by even so great a body as the Nonacle.

“There -uh- wasn’t a Nonacle on Thalybdenos for many years *before* the Exodus,” Torreb put in, his brow furrowing in thought.

Mistra could have kissed him for redirecting the conversation, however unwittingly. She could make her face expressionless only when she was playing poker and had felt herself in imminent danger of being questioned about the direction her thoughts had just taken. Like the Mysteries, it was not a matter she was prepared to get into with relative strangers who might grasp the facts but not the substance of the discussion. She, too, frowned. “You know,” she went on, “the party line about Thalybdenos in my neck of the woods has always been that evil was rampant there—except among the Exiles, of course—at the time of the Exodus, but that the real reason for the breakup was the gravitational stresses of the system. All that’s left of it is the Asteroids—that’s the asteroid belt you may have seen on your way into the system,” she added for Mosaia’s benefit.

“What I’ve heard called the March, where your seat of government is?” the paladin asked. “I remember Avador saying that Caros was not his and Ariane’s usual haunt.”

“Yes. The Uber-palace—that’s what we call their digs in fun—is built on the largest of them. Luckily, the breakup left the system with that one planetoid large enough to generate a gravity field strong enough to hold down a settlement and keep the people from flying off into space.” She looked sidelong at Habie. “My sister gave you an idea what she thought would happen if Thalás broke up?”

Habie nodded vigorously. “Then it’s KERBLAM for the rest of the system.” There was a chuffing sound from Mosaia. “All right, not `

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'KERBLAM' exactly. More like—" She gestured an inward spiral with one hand. "Caros and Ereb's orbits change, or they sundive or something."

"Whereas Thalybdenos shared an orbit with nothing and affected the other three worlds equally when it was destroyed," she murmured, more for her own benefit than for anyone else's, "that is to say, not at all." Her brow furrowed further. "The Art had been established on Thalybdenos a good half-millennium before the Exodus." She looked up, aware that the act of thinking aloud in what must seem like a stream of consciousness to the others was getting her a few puzzled stares. She focused on her present surroundings, looking from Habie to Mosaia and back. "There, Habie," she said aloud as if she had never digressed, "if it's hard for you to buy and you've spent a lifetime on Caros, imagine what it's like for a complete stranger to the system!" She meant it amiably and was pleased when Mosaia responded in kind.

"I find all of your conjectures reasonable," the knight said agreeably. "It is the underlying assumptions that force me to struggle, as the Lady Habadiah also seems to be struggling." This last went from agreeable to gallant, and he made a little bow in Habie's direction.

Mistra gave him a penetrating look. "Yet you have not dismissed those underlying assumptions out of hand just because they are different from your own, nor, I think, have you dismissed our Mysteries."

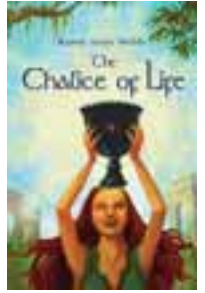
He looked thoughtful. "I think at heart our Mysteries are not so different. Both presuppose an underlying force of good that created the cosmos, do they not?"

"Not all outworlders see it that way," said Torreb. "Not complete mundanes, anyway."

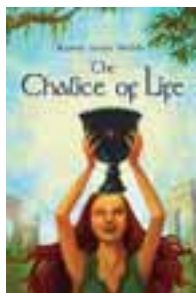
"I would, if a mundane outworlder may," he said with wry good humor, "extrapolate further and draw two conclusions of my own from your own discourse, lady, and from Master Tuhl's." He waited a beat, looking to them all for consent to continue, but mostly, Mistra thought, to herself. "I believe that, in his speech that made you feel so humbled, lady, Tuhl was suggesting that not only what you call the Art comes from the Orbs but that such diverse skills as Habie's ability to heal and Alla's to shape-change also arise from them. Perhaps even such natural-seeming abilities as the lord T'Cru's keen senses are somehow a concomitant of the Orbs' existence." Mistra took in the way Alla and T'Cru postured a little at the thought, but he had stepped in adroitly in defense of his own ideas before she could intervene to soothe the feathers he had inadvertently ruffled. "That you have named your own arts Orb-mediated magic and developed a lore about them that the others have not does not preclude the possibility that other talents have their origin in this phenomenal bit of earth. What Deneth said is true, to an extent—we *do* shape the world with our thought. But sometimes the world has shape that our thoughts cannot yet compass."

"Boy," muttered Habie, "if that's just the first observation, what's the second gonna be?"

"Nothing nearly so lofty, I assure you!" he chuckled. "It only occurred to me that Thalybdenos, too, might have had an Orb, and that the evil her



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highness describes might have had more to do with the planet's breakup than any gravitational stresses, no matter how strong."

Mistra jerked her head around at that and saw that Torreb had actually stopped in his tracks. Deneth was regarding the knight very strangely, as if he both feared him and wanted to challenge him to duel to the death. The others looked on with the sense that they did not take his words personally but understood that he had just transgressed some unwritten taboo that the humans held dear. Taking in Mosaia's look of innocent bewilderment, Mistra stepped in as graciously as she was able: it was not easy to hear one's race's worst fears voiced by an outworlder! "The party line I described," she said, surprised that she felt a sheen of perspiration on her skin, "is held somewhat sacrosanct on our worlds, Lord Clear Water—although if the gods know why, I don't."

"There is no child of insight on any of the three worlds," added Torreb, "who hasn't asked that question of an elder and been hushed."

"It doesn't make a lot of sense," said Deneth, "that such a thing would be the skeleton in the family closet. I mean, *our* ancestors were the good guys, right? Even on Thalas, if you go back far enough."

"It would make the threat to Thalas—and to the rest of us—seem that much more real, though," said Mistra.

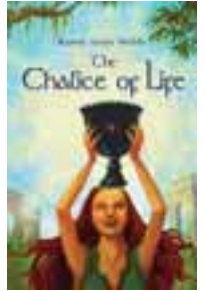
"And, as in any family," Torreb explained, "one can make as many jokes and take as many pokes at it as he wants, but Ereb forbid an outsider so much as raises an eyebrow."

"Perhaps the fear of it," Mosaia conjectured, "lies less in knowing that your ancestors kept true to the promise of your race than in speculating to what depths the iniquitous fell, for owning such would mean owning in yourself the same darkness to which they must have fallen prey." He came to a full stop and sketched a small bow that was meant to include all of the others. "If I have unwittingly transgressed on sacred ground, I humbly apologize and more humbly beg the forgiveness of all of you I have offended."

Mistra could read the reactions of her companions as if they were so many open books printed in gigantic bold-faced type. From Habie, there was frank shock that someone with a title and lands and family background would stoop to apologizing so sincerely for what was, in her opinion, a minor transgression. Torreb seemed impressed by the quiet dignity of the statement and Deneth by its simple eloquence. Alla and T'Cru looked pleasantly surprised to see such a display of courtesy in a human. Long before the first of them put into words the sentiment that he should think nothing of it, it was clear that they not only forgave him but found both the stumble and the recoup endearing.

Mistra was forced to admit to every one of the reactions she saw in the others. Aloud, she said, "With so many different races represented, we should count ourselves lucky if that's the worst offense any of us gives the others." To herself, she was thinking of Mosaia, Lord Clear Water, *Oh no! Another one with looks, brains, insight and now manners. I am doomed!* Putting aside the thought, she consulted the Portal Stone again and redirected their course away from the stream.

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In the palace that served as the seat of government for the entire Union, Avador led a blindfolded Ariane into the Chamber of the Nonacle. Caros and Ereb both elected the Nonacles that served as a divining and enforcement agency of the planetary governments; there was a third, elected by all three worlds, that met here and served the needs of the Union as a whole. Although several Thalacians had been elected to this supreme body, the world of Thalac itself was still struggling with getting its own Nonacle elected.

Those august bodies existed only to enforce the will of monarchs and council. Properly directed, their power was staggering. They could, as Mistra had indicated, impose Abrogation, the deprivation of any member of the Union of the powers that were his inborn right if he were judged a serious enough criminal. The Nonacle of Caros had once teleported an entire war fleet from the Dantonian Empire back to its home system when its government did not heed the warnings that Caros did not have a mind to be “annexed.”

“I could have kept my eyes closed,” Ariane complained with little vehemence.

“Please,” Avador laughed, “allow me my moment of drama. After all, *I* was the one Eliannes revealed this to.” He positioned her to one side of the nine-pointed star that formed the grid from which the convened Nonacle worked. The design was formed from an intricate tile inlay that went on to form lovely designs, most having mystical import, across the rest of the floor. “Here we are.” He removed the blindfold.

Ariane gasped in wonder. Before her, set in a golden stand that was, in turn, set on a scrolly little bit of design that might have been made for it, sat a crystal globe easily two meters in diameter. A golden nimbus surrounded it. “It’s wonderful!” she breathed. “Is it—?”

“Tuned in to the questors, yes. It pays to have a wife consecrated to a goddess of mercy! Eliannes said she blessed it after Dorlas had crafted it, but it was all at Arayne’s behest. She said we may not be able to follow them quite every step of the way, especially if they skip around in time as well as space, but we should be able to assure ourselves of everyone’s well-being from time to time, and of how the quest is getting on. With the questors just having embarked from Tuhl’s wood this morning, the time has come to lay before our subjects the details of the quest, including the identities of Minissa’s Chosen. Now we can also say we actually have a means of keeping an eye on them.”

“And that it’s not only *our* eyes that are doing the keeping! I’ve dreaded this press conference for weeks. My fear is that some fool will stand up and say we devised this out of our own imaginations as a way to keep the Thalacians in line, that quest and questors are fabrications, and that any reports we get are things you and I and the Nonacle are making up while we groom a backwoods commoner to play the part of Eliander.”

“This way,” he said with a broad grin, “we can have others observe,

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could charge anyone who wants to take a peek a few credits an hour! That would be good for the royal treasury as well as for morale, eh? Here, let's give it a quick test run. Then we can alert the media."

The sun was westering as the questors came to the top of a rise that overlooked the ruins of what must once have been a great city.

"There?" Mistra asked, flashing the Portal Stone.

Mosaia, looking to her for permission, moved her hand in a narrow arc. "Beyond, I would reckon," he said when it was clear the Stone shone slightly brighter just to one side of the ruin. He pointed to a small ring of hills that lay on the side of the ruin opposite them. "There, maybe."

They slipped and slid a little getting down the embankment but found level ground at its foot. Soon, they struck what gave the appearance of having once been a main road, though it was now no better than a swath of packed earth marked here and there with an ancient bit of paving. As they skirted the ruin, the Stone glowed more and more brightly. As they approached the ring of hills, it began to bounce excitedly on Mistra's palm as though impatient to come to the Portal. It gave them the odd impression that it regarded the Portal as its well-loved but long-lost brother and that it was most anxious that they be reunited. This behavior heartened them until, realizing that they must be almost on top of the Portal, they found themselves outside a dark cavern that led into the side of the nearest hill. It looked less than inviting. From its mouth issued a chill vapor.

"What does this remind me of?" Mistra wondered in a voice so small no one heard her.

"Well, in we go, eh?" Deneth said with forced cheerfulness.

Mosaia pulled a torch from his pack. Before he could light it manually, Mistra had done so with a nod and a wink, without ever having given the matter a second thought. She had been in the company of mundanes for so long that coming to their rescue without them first soliciting her help had become second nature. Mosaia, however, had spent no time at all among sorcerers. For a moment, he looked unsure which to trust less: the cavern, the torch, or the woman. Just as he was shaking his head as if to clear it of bemusement, Mistra bit her lip in realization of how she might have just trespassed. Before she could apologize, though, he put up his hands in a show of conciliation, looking a little sheepish about the gaffe: had he not already decided these were all goodly folk? The others took in the silent exchange and reacted with sympathetic laughter. When Mosaia made to take the lead, no one gainsaid him. They plunged into the cave in a loose but cautious knot.

Mistra lagged behind, still trying to remember. Abruptly, it struck her. "Dragon breath!" she said aloud, though now there was no one close enough to hear her. She hurried along after them, more curious and pleased than frightened.

But by now the group hardly needed her memories to warn them! One twist of the passage, and they stood upon the threshold of a huge cavern. At

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its terminal end was an arch that could only have been the Portal. It glowed faintly, and here and there on the lintel they could make out carvings of the Stag. Unfortunately, planted in front of it, immobile but for its labored breathing, lay a huge, ancient dragon. Its color was metallic rather than spectral, though its actual hue was difficult to determine in this light and with the creature in this state: it might have been copper or bronze. Its massive body blocked so much of the Portal that not even Habie could have squeezed by it.

“Well,” said Deneth, nodding in a sort of perverse satisfaction. “Good.”

“Is it a-a-a dragon?” Habie stammered, but it was from disbelief rather than fear.

“Oh, yes,” Alla affirmed, quite matter-of-fact about the whole thing.

Habie’s face lit up. “Lethal! Does it breathe fire and stuff?” She had never seen a dragon, but from the stories she knew of them, she thought they must be splendid creatures.

“Dragons breathe all sorts of things, Habie. But even if this one *does* breathe fire, and even if he suddenly springs to life, I think he will not harm us. Can’t you feel that he is a kindly and noble creature?”

Habie strained her senses, trying to pick up the nuances in the Ether that Alla seemed confident she could identify, and finally sensing—something. It was more the absence of the malign than the presence of the beneficent, but it was a start. She felt Alla slip a hand into hers and squeeze, and the sense of beneficence intensified. The experience left her with a rosy glow inside.

T’Cru’s tail twitched as he sniffed the air. “This one won’t be breathing any such thing—on anyone, for a long while.” He approached the still beast with a pronounced lack of caution and brushed noses with it. He looked and sniffed a moment before continuing. “It’s ill.”

“Seriously?” asked Mosaia at the same time as Deneth said, “Gee, ya think?”

“I think so,” T’Cru responded, “but I am no diagnostician of aught that has scales or wings. Alla, perhaps you as a shape-changer or Torreb, you as priest would have a better insight.”

“Look,” said Alla. She walked up to the dragon and touched a hand to its skin. Large patches of it were discolored. “It’s turned green in places.” Her voice was mystified, but her manner was sympathetic.

Deneth looked skeptical. “You mean he’s tarnishing?”

“In a way, yes.”

Torreb joined her. “It seems to be some kind of desquamation, the way humans lose hair or slough skin during certain fevers.”

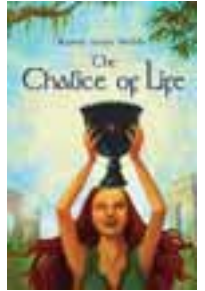
“So he’s going to die sitting there in front of the Portal?” asked Deneth.

“If we can’t find a way to help him—soon—then, yes.”

“Can you move him or shrink him or do anything useful?”

“Friend Deneth,” said Mosaia, “where is your compassion? Here is an ill creature, sentient and good. We can hardly push it aside and ignore it.”

“Well, what can *we* do about it? Alla’s used to small woodland creatures, Torreb’s used to humans, and so are you. Habie at her best could never take on damage this extensive and hope to survive. Even Mistra...”



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He broke off at a glare from the Princess and shrugged. “What *can* we do, anyway?”

Torreb had fallen into a reverie after making his assertion, but now he roused himself. “Deneth, how many instruments can you play?”

“I don’t know. I never counted.”

“Enumerate a few.”

“Lute, lyre, harp, mandolin, cittern, piano, even the violin—almost anything stringed.”

“And if I handed you a stringed instrument you’d never played? A guitar, say?”

“I could manage.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s a bit like most of the others, isn’t it? Fingered and plucked.”

“Exactly. You apply the same principles. I can’t say I don’t wish one of my brother priests who serve Thalybdenos were here—they’re the best healers, of course, even among the Erebites—but I’m willing to see what I can do.” He marched up to the dragon and felt for the contacts that would correspond to those on the human head used to initiate the mentalic healing bond. He found many but had to content himself with selecting the four strongest his spread fingers could reach at once. Although this represented a compromise, it seemed to do the trick.

Gathering around Torreb and the dragon, the others watched his face empty itself of all expression as he entered the healing trance. They looked on placidly for some minutes, but as those minutes lengthened with Torreb seeming to seek deeper and deeper into the trance and the dragon showing now sign of responding, they became concerned. A heartbeat before Mosaia and Alla would have offered their assistance, the dragon’s eyes slowly opened. They were rimmed in green and shot with fine green blood vessels. They rolled slowly here and there, just enough to take in the entire group. The creature tried to lift its mighty head and failed: Torreb maintained the contacts while moving no more than a leaf in a light breeze. It opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a dull croaking. Two tiny curls of steam drifted from its nostrils then—the draconian equivalent of a sigh. The party found the entire feeble demonstration heart-wrenching, even Deneth, who had given the impression he viewed the dragon as an inconvenience to be removed rather than needy individual to be helped.

The dragon looked back at Torreb and digested what the priest was doing. Its eyes gleamed—the only part of his face capable of expressing happiness in its weakened state. Then it closed its eyes, but not to sleep. A profound sense of concentration emanated from it. Then, so suddenly in the tense stillness that all save Torreb jumped, a voice spoke. “My dear friends,” it said. It was the dragon communicating, but the voice was Torreb’s. Throughout the exchange that followed, he maintained the contacts as well as his trance. Watching only his lips move proved an eerie experience for his companions!

“Long have I lain here,” it went on. “I prayed to my ancestors, to the Great Spirit Dragon Herself that someone would come to aid me. *She* heard me and took my soul to Her Divine Garden, stilling my body that my illness

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would not slay me untimely.”

“Whose idea was it that you plunk yourself down in front of our Portal?” Deneth muttered, as if he knew his expression betrayed sympathy and was eager to counter the effect. He got Mistra’s elbow in his ribs.

“My people were falling ill when I left my land. A day’s flight south only, but I had to crawl much of the way. My wings... so weak now...”

“What are you ill from?” asked Alla.

“Minerals. Not enough in our food supply. Makes us begin to waste like this. Here, the land is rich. I meant to collect mineral concentrates and take them home. But the illness overcame me. I crawled here, to this place of Power, and laid me down.” Torreb’s voice was beginning to fade.

“What does the dragon mean by ‘mineral concentrates?’” Mosaia asked Alla. “Is it a ration?”

“Colors. Pieces of color...” It came as one final gasp.

“Oh,” said Deneth. “That’s much clearer.”

“Do you suppose he means a gem mine?” asked Mistra, having synthesized the information a little faster than the others.

“Yes, yes.” The dragon revived a little at the thought that one of these creatures understood. “That is what humans call them. Jewels. Gemstones. But I am so weak...”

“Jewels?” Habie exclaimed. Her eyes lit, and Deneth showed a sudden interest. “Sounds good to me.”

“These gems,” Mosaia said in a burst of practicality, “must we mine them ourselves?”

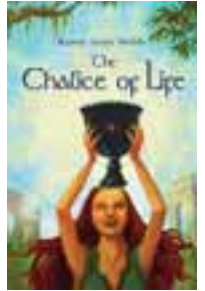
Torreb’s breathing was becoming labored. “Entrance—in ruined city. Look for Land’s End.” Though the dragon seemed no worse, Torreb himself went pale from the effort of maintaining the contact.

“Torreb,” Alla said quietly. “Break the contact.” The priest made one attempt, so weak it seemed half-hearted, and entirely unsuccessful. He began to perspire heavily and was now looking paler and fainter by the second. “Torreb?” She touched his shoulder and shook him in an effort to jar him loose. An instant after she made contact, she yanked her hand back as if she suddenly realized she had just placed it within the jaws of a hungry lion: she had felt herself being drawn into the mind fusion as well. She leaned her hands on her knees, shaking her head and looking to the others in mute appeal. That they understood her dilemma was clearly written in their faces.

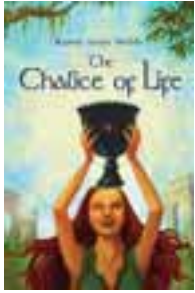
T’Cru took in the situation and did the most sensible thing he could think of: he pounced. Rather than knocking Torreb loose, however, he rebounded as though he had hit a trampoline. “So much for that idea,” he muttered.

“No, T’Cru,” said Alla. “It did some good. Look! His color’s improving.”

“Wait,” cautioned Mistra when she saw T’Cru resign himself to the idea of trying again. “It could damage both their minds to break the contact forcibly by magic, but maybe I can use it to help you indirectly...” She concentrated for a few seconds, then raised her hand and pointed it in Torreb’s direction, then took on the stillness only demonstrated by those



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who are making a supreme effort of will. “Now, T’Cru,” she said through clenched teeth. The Tigroid sprang once more. This time, Torrebb staggered back under his substantial weight. Mistra herself reeled from the mental impact, but Mosaia reached out an arm to steady her.

“You do good work, lady,” he complimented, in part to make up for his perceived lack of chivalry when she had lit the torch. “What did you do that spared their minds?”

“Just suspended the strengthening of the contact. It was an easy hold to break once the contact quit sucking Torrebb in. What mind and will lie dormant in that great, ill body, though!” And she, too, leaned her hands upon her knees while she caught her breath.

Torrebb stood and brushed off his clerical robes. He looked little the worse for wear, but he clearly had no memory of the encounter. “How’d I do?” He might have been a child wondering how a loved but strict instructor was grading his first art project.

“You were great,” Deneth said flatly. “You found us a major task. Fortunately, it involves jewels.”

“The dragon spoke through you,” Alla explained. “It was wonderful. He said the cure for his illness can only be created using gems from a mine in the city we passed to restore him and his people.”

“Oh? Oh, really?” This might have been pleasant surprise, or merely a show of how dazed he had been by the experience: had Alla asserted instead that they must extract his brain for further testing, his reply would have been the same. Casting a glance downward at his sweaty, dusty robes seemed to snap him back to his present surroundings. “Got a bit involved in the contact, did I?”

“Yes. Are you all right?”

“Seem to be.” He smiled gratefully at her concern.

Deneth looked outside. “Look, do you suppose he can wait till tomorrow? We won’t help anyone if we stumble down the mine shaft in the dark and break our necks.”

“Sadly, I agree,” said Mosaia, “though I begrudge the time wasted. I would see this noble creature and his folk healed as soon as possible.”

Reasoning that, if the Great Spirit Dragon had suspended the dragon’s life processes before, then she could reasonably help the creature again while they sought to accomplish its mission, they made their way back to the cave entrance and cast about for a campsite. A few minutes’ search turned up a hollow situated comfortably between the ruin and the cave. It was far enough away that they would not have to endure the chill vapor that issued from the cave mouth but near enough that they could easily take turns periodically checking on the dragon’s condition.

Dinner turned out far better than any of them had anticipated. Tuhl (or whoever had seen to the packs) had thrown in rations that were several cuts above the average, as they learned when Mistra sought on a whim to rehydrate one of the small packets. Rather than ending up with a soggy meat jerky or a tacky fruit paste, she found herself holding a bowl of tolerably flavored stew vegetables. Another packet really *was* some sort of dried meat, but it reconstituted to the texture and flavor of—well,

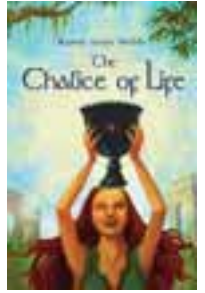
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something red and beefy. Mosaia's pack, by far the largest, contained some cookware; Alla's held a small packet of spices; Habie's had a box of sweetmeats and Deneth's a bottle of brandy. Soon they had a fire going and an excellent stew preparing. With Deneth's lute to provide background music, they were soon gabbing like old friends over a pitcher of ale at their local pub and telling tales as tall as the surrounding hills.

They took it in turn to watch by twos, assigning one of the more skilled healers to each pair. When each pair had finished its watch, they would wake the next, and then run off to check on the dragon before they bedded down for the night. They cast lots for the one who would not have to watch for that evening, and Deneth won.

"Really, it should be Torrebe," the bard protested. "He's done most of the important work, and he'll be the one we'll have to come and get if the dragon seems to be getting worse."

But Torrebe shrugged off the consideration. "Undoubtedly there will be nights when you watch, even though you know someone will wake you in the small hours of the morning wanting you to sing him a lullaby."



"I met the Great Spirit Dragon once," Mistra said as she and Mosaia went to check on the dragon around midnight. "At least, I think I did—those sorts of experiences are always so hard to quantify. It may have been a vision."

He laughed. "The broad hints I heard about your adventures at the palace made you sound like a knight on errantry."

She, too, laughed, but there was an edge of self-mockery in it. "I would have said the man I was traveling with was the knight and I was more like the comedy relief!" For (she thought) no good reason, a lump formed in her throat. "Still, between us we did right a few wrongs. It can be a cold, harsh universe out there."

"A single world can be cold and harsh enough. I can barely imagine enduring the chill and harshness of the galaxy at large! Yet there are warm spots amid the cold, are there not?"

"Oh, yes." She cast her eyes to the sky above.

He sighed. "I think I have transgressed again, and again I did not mean to."

She shook her head. "It's nothing you could have perceived when I myself am doing my best not to acknowledge it. My traveling companion was—" She gestured helplessly. "—much more than a companion. The quest—took me away from him." It was as much as she was willing to delve into it with a stranger, even a sympathetic one with so noble a heart as she saw in Mosaia.

"What was the -um- Great Spirit Dragon like? Is it a god of dragonkind?"

She thought he was redirecting her purposely, and she was pleased to let him. "A demi-goddess, I think, although she was close to Minissa in spirit and province. She said she tended to all animal-kind, especially the

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sentient. It's sad, really. Despite that, she empowered us to destroy the last of a giant sentient insectoid race, one nasty enough to decimate a large part of the galaxy."

"How so?"

"They drank blood, used poison, had terrible psionic powers, that sort of thing."

"But the Spirit Dragon was good?"

"Yes, but confusing. She tested us for—well, I suppose it was selflessness and depth of commitment before she let us go on. She wanted us to succeed, even though it meant destroying the last of a race she looked after."

"The great tasks are often like that, I think. There is not sadness on one side and joy on the other, but a blending of both in every course that is open to you."

"I remember one of my philosophy tutors teaching us that the worst battles are not those of good against evil but of right against right."

He nodded agreement. "You and I are fortunate in that we have principles—your Ethic, my Law—to guide us, and the promise of close reunion with the Divine in the world to come, so we prosecute the Divine will with a good will."

She considered him a moment before she replied. He did see to the heart of a matter more easily—more *clearly*—than most! He may have meant his remarks only to philosophize and not to cheer, but they had that effect on her mood nonetheless. "It may be so. At least, our prosecuting the Ethic brought us into contact with a number of beings from the Otherworld. We even saw Ereb once—that's Torreb's patron, our god of justice and war in a righteous cause."

"A fit deity for a paladin to worship, were I not from a culture that asserts the existence of a single godhead! If you encountered so many godly creatures, you must be high in the favor of your own Pantheon, or whatever deity your companion professed to worship."

She laughed. "Oh, I don't know. More like possessed of the knack for getting into the sort of trouble the gods look after." She looked at him sidelong. "The notion of a multiplicity of gods doesn't throw you, as it would some."

He shrugged. "As I said, the roots of our two faiths are not so divergent, and my own monotheistic faith has roots that are polytheistic—or polysymbolic or polyvalent, depending upon how you choose to look at it."

She surprised a whimsical expression on his face. "What?" she asked, referring to his expression rather than to his discourse.

His laugh and shrug were both gestures of helplessness. "I cannot remember the last time I discussed such things with anyone beyond my house priest—not with my brothers-in-arms, and certainly not with a woman."

"Perhaps I'm having another irresistible effect on you," she teased. "Perhaps this one is completely voluntary. Perhaps I've enchanted you into thinking I'm a brother-in-arms rather than a sister."

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"I think not!" he laughed. "Your majesty is far too comely to be taken for anything remotely male. I must confess that during our first few encounters, it was little more than my vow of chastity that kept me from regarding you in a way unseemly for a paladin. I had come across the effect only once before, in dealing with—please excuse me!—a lady of the evening I once had cause to arrest while serving in the city guard. But where she was actively plying her trade, your majesty's behavior was the very touchstone of modesty and propriety."

"I think you overstate your case," she laughed, "but I thank you for the favorable comparison. As regards discussing the mysteries of the cosmos with women and sorcerers and warriors not under the vows you yourself bear, you're doing very well for a rookie! There's no one like a cleric from the Union, if you want to get into a lengthy discussion about the foundations of the universe and gods and the nature of evil. And, in case my family didn't clue you in, that classification takes in the entire royal families of both Caros and Ereb."

"Then you are a—priestess?"

"It's an honorary title, but I like to think I take it more seriously than most. Does this mean you need Torreb to confess you?"

"That I've been discussing the great truths with someone whose very nature flies in the face of conventional Falidian thought? I'm not sure I could get away with it by confessing to a priest whose faith has such a plethora of gods and such a dearth of ritual. I would be condemning myself doubly, according to most."

"And according to you?" She had been bantering lightly with him, but she asked this last question with utter sobriety.

He pondered. "I am an archetype of my station and culture in many ways, lady, but not in all. I think—" He rolled his eyes heavenward. "I think I may take some time to accustom myself to the many ways in which I did not realize I was a fluke."

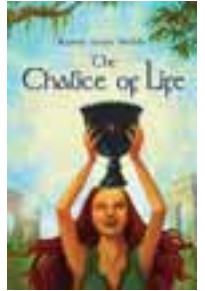
She laughed with him at the observation then quieted as they entered the cave mouth. A little levity was all well and good, but she did not want their merriment to discommode the ill creature who lay within. She took a few steps, then stopped and listened. Mosaia raised a brow in query, then tilted his head as he, too, heard what she did. It was music—the sweet strains of a lute. They exchanged a glance, then proceeded as quietly as they could. They did not enter the main chamber but only peered around the corner of the archway. There across the chamber from them, seated at the dragon's great head, was Deneth. Mistra felt her heart well over at the sweetness of the gesture.

"After all his grumbling," she whispered.

"I would say the dragon is in excellent hands," Mosaia whispered back.

She nodded. They withdrew together, leaving no more trace of their passage than the murmur of the night wind.

Syndycyr looked up from his work, vaguely aware that the Carotian



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woman was present. He cocked his head a moment, as if listening, then shook it in dismissal and went back to compounding his herbs. She was seeing him in a dream, nothing more. That shouldn't be odd, considering the profound effect he knew he had had on her on the day she had so thinned the Veil between their worlds. It was partially his fault that their minds had come in contact. He had needed to put forth a large measure of his power to probe the wood at all, enchanted as it was against evil, and that had left him somewhat vulnerable to minds that were opening themselves to psychic impressions—and to one mind in particular.

He shrugged off the error as a tactical risk. He had turned the encounter to his advantage, no matter how it had come about. He had learned the number of the party and gotten glimmerings of the kind and aptitudes of each, and he had gotten almost too good a look at the woman. Mistra—that was her name now. She was, he thought, a princess of one of the royal houses, probably from Caros. *Yes, he mused, if the time has come for Eliander to be rescued, she would have to be about this age. Fitting that she should be born of royal blood and consecrated to the Giver of Life. She has really changed very little...* He had discerned from the contact an agile mind possessed of a peculiar degree of both magical and psionic strength, and the soul of an artist: an interesting combination. *And that, too, has changed very little.*

A deceptively soft, feminine laugh drifted across the room to him. "You tire of my company and yearn for commerce with your own kind, I think," said his companion. It was not an accusation; if anything, she found the thought entertaining.

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He looked up from his crucible. The crimson smoke that always accompanied her appearance was just dissipating. He smiled in appreciation of her beauty and insight, for she owned these in measure mortal woman could never hope to attain. Still, there were things mortal women offered that would forever escape this one. Her beauty was cold, her insight shrewd and untempered with compassion. Lilith had been convenient to him, a mistress in all senses of the word, although, as his power had waxed, his semblance of servitude had diminished, and her appearances in his bed had become more frequent. The telltale signs of her diabolical nature had always attracted rather than repelled him. Besides, he was in thrall to her only indirectly.

"She is becoming," Lilith continued, "and certainly capable of fanning the flame of your desires. Sorceress, warrior, priestess, princess of her kind—yes, I think she would be worthy of you."

"You wish to sever *our* relationship?"

"Not in the least, sweet one." It was a seductive purr. She closed on him. Her body was voluptuous, also beyond the measure of mortal woman, but what beckoned him was the invitation in her eyes. "I merely indicate that I have no objection to sharing the more ephemeral parts of you. A mortal woman can hardly have need of your soul."

He flashed her a wry smile. His eyes smoldered—he had early on given up trying to resist the effects of her allure or taking pains to hide them—but he made no move to take her in his arms. He turned his attention, rather,

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back to his work. “Can it be you’ve developed a sense of fair play?”

“My father forbid! What *can* you mean?”

“Well, your diabolical consort has never seen fit to stand in the way of your dalliances with me. Perhaps, in kind, you see no reason to stand in the way of any dalliances I might have with others.”

She ran a manicured finger under the angle of his jaw and kissed him lightly. “Our ultimate loyalty is to my father, as is yours. Beyond that, fidelity is nothing either he or I treasures for its own sake. Besides, it might be amusing to see what influence you might have over one of these holy questors.” The phrase obviously left a bad taste in her mouth.

Syndycyr sighed. “Therein lies the obstacle. We are at cross-purposes. She is a potential enemy.”

The seductive laugh again. “Have you served me for so long and learned so little of my ways? Help her to attain her goal. Eliander may be freed and still never live to sit upon the throne of Thalas.”

“You underestimate me, Lilith. I had thought the most elegant solution would be to have them purchase Eliander’s freedom at the cost of his life.”

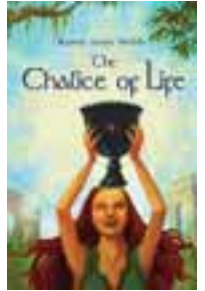
She clapped her hands in glee. “Excellent, my pet!”

A shrewd light came to his eyes. “Another thing I’ve learned from you and your—ahem—friends is that occasionally the best horrors are in people’s minds, the worst traps are the ones *they* imagine have been set, the worst motives are the ones *they* ascribe to any who cross them. They’ve seen me now. I even made an effort to bring Mistra to me. They now think that my chief concern is for the failure of the quest itself, to prevent them from reaching Eliander at all. My reasons will not have entered their darkest dreams. Granted, Mistra learned my true name, but that brief joining of minds left her mind forever open to me.” He pursed his lips, musing.

“So you mean to do—?”

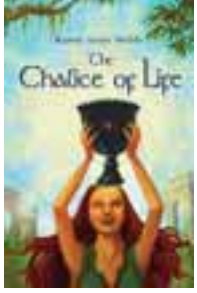
“Nothing beyond that which will preserve for them the illusion of my interference: that rousing send-off will stay with them for weeks to come! As for the woman who holds the key to Eliander’s freedom...” He trailed off into a laugh that made even the Princess of the Seven Hells tremble.

Something in the air—the freshness, the sense of history, the proximity of the Portal—brought to the entire party sleep that was deep and invigorating. All seven awoke refreshed. They set about preparing a hasty breakfast and readying themselves to begin their search of the ruin. Mosaia was just commenting on the tranquility of the place when they heard footsteps coming from the rise above them. A beat of apprehensive silence, then hands were grabbing frantically for weapons, bodies were dropping into combat crouches, and the seven of them were assembling into an unrehearsed but tenable defensive



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posture. There was no sound save the footsteps above them for several seconds. The footsteps paused a moment, then continued at a slower pace to the edge of the hollow.

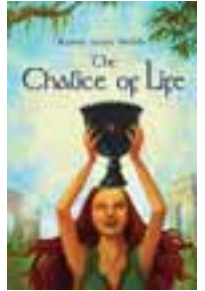
A twelve-headed hydra would hardly have surprised them more.

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CHAPTER 6



Beneath the Portal

“There are more things in the heavens and Caros, Lord Clear
Water, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”
—Tuhl to Mosaia

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“Oh, I say!” exclaimed the figure that had stridden into view above them. It resembled a human—at least, it had the right number of appendages in the right places—but a voluminous khaki shirt and shorts and a huge safari-style helmet that concealed everything from the chin up made any further identification of gender or species difficult. “I thought *we* were the first group to the dig, but isn’t that always the way? Word goes out over the airwaves even faster than it comes in off the newswire, word travels even faster than the speed of sound among those old gossips of professors emeritus, word gets out and about and around completely in all the circles that demand to know about it, and there you are. I guess we’ve been beaten to it! You must be privately funded or come from one of those smaller places that have rich patrons who can dash off a check for a million astrids at a moment’s notice. Perhaps we can work together, though, no that doesn’t always work out amicably if we have institutions as well as us individuals to split the credit with oh dear.” The figure’s speech was a vocal blur that came skidding to a precipitous halt with those last two words. Despite those last two words, however, it did not seem especially dismayed that its “group” had been beaten to the “dig”—words and contexts lacking

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in the vocabulary of all seven of the questors.

Mosaia stepped forward. He had decided from the pitch of the voice and the general contour of the body (more from its lack of muscle mass than from the presence of curves) that this was a human female. He did his best to peer under the helmet-like affair that shaded “her” face; he thought he saw plain but intelligent features, although these, too, were somewhat androgynous. The figure bobbed as “she” pelted them with speech, and this mannerism, combined with the way “her” bony limbs moved in fits and starts as “she” gestured, painted in his mind no image more clear than that of a large bird.

“Excuse us, lady,” he said, betting all his chips on one throw in addressing the figure with a gender-specific title, “but we are at cross-purposes. If by ‘dig’ you mean an archaeological expedition—” Fairly heavy wagering here as well. “—please be about your business and consider yourselves the first on the scene. We have another errand here entirely.”

“My goodness! Out here in the middle of nowhere? Whatever can you be doing?”

“We’re on a quest,” Habie enthused, pushing in front of the knight.

“A what?” She looked around in an attempt to find the speaker. Meeting with no success, she pushed up her helmet (now Mosaia could see that, yes, these were plain but intelligent *female* features), adjusted her spectacles, removed them, cleaned them, adjusted them again, and finally leaned forward with a squint. She was clearly confused by what she saw. Her face screwed itself up in a way that Mosaia interpreted to mean some bits of her brain were working overtime to convince other bits that she was not hallucinating. He got the impression that her eyes and mouth did not work well together. It was as if her brain were incapable of accommodating the demands of both simultaneously; it was only now that she was speaking in very short, discrete sentences that she was able to take in her listeners’ appearance properly. “You’re not by any chance a traveling circus, are you?” she asked weakly. It was clear to him that she was advancing the only hypothesis that did not radically upset her world view.

Mosaia had to suppress a chuckle. As the one questor from a basically “mundane” planet, he could see what an odd sight the Lemurian, the Tigroid, and the assorted humans must be to mundane eyes. It had not been hard for him to accept the appearance of the Union’s non-human races, for he had gone there expecting to meet the unfamiliar. This woman must be native to this world, he reasoned, and if her world were anything like Falidia, the atypical would be looked upon with disapproval, if not outright terror.

T’Cru obviously did not see the humor, for he began to stalk forward, a low growl emanating from his throat. Mosaia reached down and gripped him by the collar. He felt a ripple of shock course through the Tigroid’s body. T’Cru must have been surprised at the strength in his arm—Mosaia suspected the Tigroids would view freight trains, large buildings and little else as capable of stopping them once they were on the move, and certainly a Tigroid crown prince was not accustomed to having hands laid upon him without his express consent. Mosaia made to remove his hand, then saw he

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needn't have bothered. T'Cru had sat back on his haunches and taken to purring and preening a bit when the woman jumped behind a rock at his approach: T'Cru had made his point that he was no circus animal to be trifled with. The woman peered out only timidly, and her glasses were misted over.

"Shouldn't that animal be caged?" she ventured. Mosaia winced. It was *not* the right thing to say in the circumstances, but she could hardly have known that.

T'Cru stopped preening. His tail flicked this way and that; otherwise, he remained motionless. It was a far more disconcerting sight than his advance had been. "That animal," he said in his most scathingly aristocratic tones, "is a prince among his own people. He suggests you make your tone of voice more respectful."

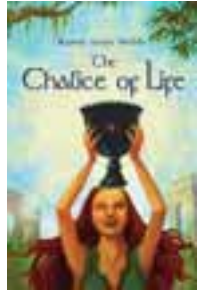
That was all the poor woman could take. She fainted dead away on the spot. Mosaia shot a withering glance at T'Cru, then led the charge up the hill to see to her. It was not a bad faint—certainly nothing that a tap on the face, a light laying on of hands, and the chafing of her limbs could not deal with.

"Good first contact technique there, T'Cru," he heard Deneth growl. "Impress the locals and make friends with them." Looking up, Mosaia saw T'Cru look as sheepish as it is possible for a feline to look.

The woman came quickly out of the faint with just his own simple ministrations. Unfortunately, staring up into that sea of faces—faces that were strange in all senses of the term—she went right back into it. In that sense, reviving her was touch and go for a few minutes. He could read the entire sequence of her thoughts in her face. She would wake, see Habie, faint, wake, see T'Cru, faint, and so on till she had catalogued the composition of the group and accepted the repeated telepathic messages—even he, a relative psi-null, could feel the outpouring from those of his new friends gifted in the mentalic disciplines—that these creatures were friendly. Deneth provided some soothing improvisations on his lute to augment that sense of amity and benevolence, and Mistra observed that, as a scientist, the woman should be less perturbed when confronted by the unknown. Mosaia read in the archaeologist's face a final thought: clearly in Mistra she had found someone who spoke her language, therefore a friend, therefore someone who would protect her if she had misread those soothing nonverbal messages.

"My goodness gracious me!" she got out at last. Mosaia was finally able to assist her to sit up without having her go limp in his arms. "I'm sorry, I'm at a loss! Little furry humanoids and intelligent beasts pop up out of the ground, and in such company—minstrels and priests and warriors armed as if they came out of legend and speaking as if they understand more of the sciences than a winner of the Mizak Prize." She shook her head. "I'm a simple doctor of archaeology from the university. Maybe I should have studied anthropology," she added, half to herself, "then I wouldn't be so surprised." She held out a hand. "I'm Sally Roarke."

Supposing she would faint again if certain of the others tried to take it, Mosaia obliged her and grasped her hand. "Lord Mosaia Clear Water, lady,"



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said Mosaia. Fearing that his bending over her hand (let alone kissing it) might also startle the poor woman back into her stupor, he left it at a simple handshake. “And these are my comrades,” he continued, since the others had gotten out little more than a “hello” on their own behalfs, “all from the Carotian Union, though you can see they represent the racial diversity of that place. Here are the Princess Mistra of Caros; Prince T’Cru, heir to the crown of the Tigroid people; the lady Habadiah of the people of Lemur; the lady Alla, an *Aranyaka* from Ereb; Torreb, a goodly priest in the service of their god Ereb; and Deneth, a bard of Thalas, in the service of -um-”

“None but myself,” Deneth said with a wry grin.

“Carotian Union,” she murmured several times, as if trying to place it. “No, I don’t think I’ve heard of it. Is it one of those little countries that are always popping up all over Asherman’s Continent? No?”

Whoops, Mosaia thought. I shouldn’t have made the assumption that because a backwater like Falidia knows of other worlds in my time, everywhere the quest will take us acknowledges that concept. We may not even be in my time, or else Falidia may be more advanced than I realized!

“No matter,” the archaeologist went on. “We’re all here now, and maybe we can help each other, even if we are on different quests, as you say. Though how you heard about this place and got here quicker than the university team is beyond me. Thirty years in this business, and we’ve never been scooped.”

“Thirty years, madame?” asked Mosaia. She looked no older than her late twenties.

She blushed. “Well, not me alone, you see. The University of Astra’s Department of Archaeology. I’ve only been a part of it for a few years. I was looking to join something big, hoping to make a name for myself, you know.”

“Is there something wrong with the name you have?” Truly puzzled by the idiom, he knew that many children of the Tribes took new names after their rites of passage and wondered if she was referring to some similar ritual among archaeologists.

“What? Oh, I see. Make me well-known, I should have said. One assumes that when one meets someone who speaks one’s language so well that he has a grasp of idiomatic usage.” It was not until she dropped her eyes that Mosaia realized that what he had considered no more than thoughtful scrutiny, she had interpreted as an uncivilized stare. A becoming blush painted her cheeks.

“What are you looking for?” asked Mistra, saving him the necessity of apologizing to a lady for the breach of etiquette.

She cocked her head, as if evaluating whether, now that she had been stared down, these people were going to make sport of her. A beat before Mosaia would have jumped in with reassurances, she spoke. “You really don’t know, do you? Well, relics, I guess. This city—or what’s left of it—was once the heart of a great civilization. They were the Hamani, a warrior race ruled by great philosopher-kings and queens. Some say they were capable of wielding magic, but I’m sure that’s just some foolishness handed down by the peasant folk to describe the wonders the monarchs performed using

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flashy effects, or a technology too advanced for them to grasp.

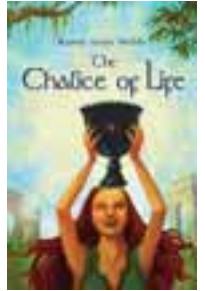
“The few pictographs we’ve found in areas the Hamani decimated make no sense. If one were to read them literally—well, as literally as one can with a pictograph—it would look like the real heart of the empire lay far, far beneath the surface, and that one only accessed it by some special technology that’s been lost, or by—well—*magic*. But that’s silly.”

Mosaia noticed some shifting and a few exchanges of lifted eyebrows among the humans from the Union at this statement, but Sally seemed too absorbed in her story to notice.

“They were powerful in their heyday—that’s maybe a thousand years ago,” Sally went on. “But then, abruptly, stories about them stopped. It seems they were wiped out almost overnight, real wrath of God type stuff, or maybe a plague. Although we’ve located isolated settlements and artifacts and tablets and so on, we’ve never found this major metropolis that all the tablets speak of that served as their capital. It’s as if the city vanished along with the people. Then, just a few months ago, a series of earthquakes swept this area. When the dust settled, some rogue archaeologists spotted this from an airplane.” She cocked her head toward the ruin. “We assumed it must have been unearthed by the quakes. Of course, if there was anything at all to those pictographs, we’d just barely be scratching the surface by poking around up here, but it’s a start.

“Well, we *rushed* to put together a briefing on the place so we could *beg* the university for funding, then we *flew* down here to see what was what. We just made camp last night.” Her shy smile reminded Mosaia of the one he had once seen his youngest sister give their athletically-minded brother: she had, he recalled, been soliciting his opinion of the frills on her first ball gown. “Shall I tell you what I’m looking for?” Not getting a negative response, she went on. “Those philosopher-kings and queens reportedly used this beautiful obsidian chalice, set with gems of all the colors of the rainbow. It was supposed to have been indestructible, except maybe by dragon fire, and I think, of all the artifacts we could find, it’s the one that’s most likely to have survived. The one thing everyone who studies the Hamani agrees on is that the chalice was a font of extraordinary healing elixirs. In fact, the premise of my doctoral thesis was at odds with what other Hamani scholars think. I postulated two new ideas. One was that, although I accept that the Hamani were a warrior race, I believed a civilization ruled over by great philosopher-kings and queens probably only kept a strong military as a means of defense and probably brought other areas under its sway through peaceful means like trade and peace treaties. The other was that if a thing as marvelous as this chalice that produced healing elixirs could truly exist in this world, then the people who created it couldn’t have died off as the result of divine retribution. I thought it far more likely that, since we’re obviously way off into the realm of myth here, they vanished because they no longer needed this world, or this world no longer needed them.”

“They attained unto all truth and so had done with this world and were removed from its confines,” he heard Mistra and Deneth murmur in tandem. The two exchanged a glance, at which point the bard went on in



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explanation, "It's just a line from a lay we have at home, *The Rainbow Warriors*: a bit of mythology and mysticism from our home to yours." And he flashed Sally a smile that nearly outshone the sun. "Please go on."

She regarded him with a thoughtful frown, then continued. "Of course, the others think I'm crazy, they're looking for skeletons and histories and tablets and things, and they pretty much believe what everyone else does about how the civilization ended. What about you?"

Deneth jumped in before any of the rest could respond. "Listen -um these people, the Hamani. How did they make their living?"

"What?"

"Well, I mean, surely they weren't all full-time warriors, whether the military existed only to keep the peace or was rabidly expansionist, and they couldn't have much agriculture underground, not without magic or hydroponics or fancy lighting."

"They were warriors," she insisted. "And the arts of peace we know they practiced really included things like poetry and music and sculpture and, of course, medicine."

"Warriors cannot eat their weapons, lady," Mosaia pointed out.

"Nor can sculptors eat their chisels or healers drink their own elixirs and hope to be sustained," Mistra observed. "They must have had someone to farm, or to trade what goods they *did* make for food."

"Or to mine for even more marketable commodities," Deneth added with another encouraging smile. "You know, clothing, metals, gems, that sort of thing." He put a slight emphasis on the word "gems."

Sally frowned. "Ah, yes, I see." Here her voice finally came out of warp drive. "Well, I hadn't thought about it much, but most of their anecdotal records tell of artifacts, like the chalice, that were encrusted with gems." She frowned. "And those pictographs that made it look like wizards moved people in and out of the underground empire sometimes had symbols that could be interpreted as gemstones radiating a sort of aura, or force. All of it would make mining seem like a logical surmise for their trade, whether they spent the rest of the time carving up their neighbors or no. Of course, the romantic in me *would* want to believe there was more to the gems than pretty rocks to use for barter, that they had the power to heal, or to move things about over long distances or such things, but that's silly, too." She frowned, wrinkled her nose, and cocked her head at them. "Say, are you smugglers?" Mosaia thought she looked enchanted by the thought rather than appalled.

"Hardly," said Mosaia, with a touch of injured pride. "I am a paladin, a holy knight, and my friends—*most* of them—are sworn to uphold the law, or at least the common good." He did nothing to eradicate from his voice the undertone that said, "And I eat smugglers for breakfast."

"What *our* business is," Mistra put in, "is to find a very special Portal—actually, we've *found* it, our problem is getting *through* it—but it's presented us with a unique and unanticipated problem."

"There's a big sick dragon lying in front of it!" Habie explained brightly.

"Habie!" shouted Mosaia along with the rest. If they had concluded, as

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he had, that this was a case where the truth would best be skirted, or at least doled out in small, discreet chunks, he would not have argued their reasoning.

"A *what?*" asked Sally. She had begun to pale again.

T'Cru snorted and twitched his tail. "Perhaps they think they *have* no dragons on—where in the cosmos *are* we, by the way?"

Sally perked up, as if this were something she could handle. "What a curious expression! `Cosmos' sounds like you hop about from planet to planet."

"But we—" Habie began, but Mosaia clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Let the lady speak, Habadiah."

"We're in the south of Sheehan's Continent, in an uncharted area. At least, *we've* never charted it. Perhaps you have?"

"Not so we've ever written it down," Torreb fudged. "*Your* people, Dr. Roarke—what do *they* call this planet?"

"Astra, for one of the goddesses of the Foretimes. Why, what do *your* people call it?"

"We -um- each have a different name for it, according to the legends of our own kind," Mosaia explained. He did his best not to notice the covertly exchanged glances and the suppressed smiles of his comrades at his willful misdirection. *Well, it wasn't necessarily a lie, he thought defiantly. Certainly some spacefaring race somewhere has charted this worlds, and different cultures with astrogation have named different worlds according to their own mythoi for common use.*

Sally pondered that a moment then went on. "Anyway, we don't have dragons where *I* come from, but I've seen two on expeditions. One was just flying overhead, but the other walked right into our camp, fussing because we had disturbed the entrance to her lair. We barely came away with our lives and enough gear to get us back to civilization, and we had to make reparations. The university had us on half-salary for months to make up for the outlay, as if the experience wasn't punishment enough. If you've seen a dragon near here, you should come with me and warn the others. We all may need to clear out."

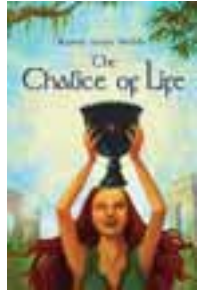
"You needn't worry," Alla reassured her. "The dragon's quite ill. All we need to do is make it well, and it'll be on its way. Then we can be on ours."

"And there, our paths may lie together," said Mosaia, "for the dragon's malady may be cured by the gems that can be found in this area. It may be that your chalice and our gems lie in the same place."

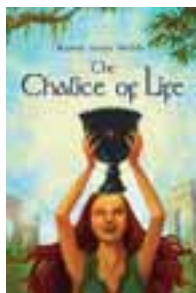
"Well, let's be about it, then," said Sally. "Shall I take you to our camp, or do you just want to continue with me on my once-over of the place?"

"Onward, by all means," Deneth said cheerfully. "Come, children. Destiny, fame, and riches await!"

The questors shouldered their gear and followed Sally up the rise. The brief glimpse of the area that they had had as they skirted it at dusk the



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night before had left them totally unprepared for the vastness of the ruin. It spread out in all directions to the edge of a wood that lay barely closer than the horizon.

“Gods!” breathed Torreb.

“So much for any hints the dragon gave us,” said Deneth.

“Sally, the dragon said to look for ‘land’s end.’ Does that mean anything to you?”

“Not really,” she replied, surveying the expanse of crumbling stone.

“Not an end in sight, is there? Was it a riddle, or a pun maybe? A mine would be at the end of the land, in a way, wouldn’t it?”

They followed her about the ruin for several hours. The solitude of the place struck them as profoundly as the sense of its vast age. As the sun climbed, they heard little but the fall of an occasional rock. Their very words eventually came in whispers, this gesture arising from a subliminal feeling of, if not sanctity, then venerability about the place. Courtyard after courtyard, temple after temple, home after home they passed, but never did they see an end to the land or a way into the earth beneath them. The place might originally have been built above ground for all the suggestion of a way down it offered.

“Shame there’s no street guide,” Deneth said at last.

“Aye,” Mosaia agreed with a wan smile. “Or a directory of spots of historical interest.”

“What’s that?” asked Habie. She pointed to a level area many meters away from them and slightly above. There were several shimmering columns whose height could not be guessed at that distance.

“Transport beams?” Mistra asked with a frown. She toyed with the hilt of her sword, then turned to Sally. “But you don’t have—” Above them, a band of scruffy looking humans shimmered into existence in several large waves.

“Do you have expeditious means of getting about?” Mosaia bailed her out. Gently but firmly, he motioned or forced everyone else under cover.

“What, airplanes and things?” asked Sally.

“No,” said Mistra. “More sophisticated things—machines that can transport matter across great distances by a sort of dispersal/reintegration process.”

“Your scientific discipline must be much different from my own! The fanciest thing I know about is a stasis field in which we can preserve things *while* they’re moved—but nothing like what you’re describing.” She went through the routine of frowning, wrinkling her nose, and cocking her head again. “Are you an engineer?”

“No, and I have a bad feeling about this. Are you armed, Sally?” She did not take her eyes off the smugglers (for so she already thought of them). At present, they were milling about the place where they had materialized and looking as though they were taking readings with a variety of gadgets.

“No! Well, I have a flare gun and one that fires tranquilizer darts. We learned from that experience with the dragon to be prepared!”

“Best have them to hand, lady,” Mosaia said quietly, drawing his sword from the harness on his back.

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“But why?”

“I think someone else may have stumbled into this ruin,” explained Deneth, also drawing his sword, “and I bet they’re here more for our jewels than your artifacts. I wonder what their chances are of carrying swords or daggers or quarterstaves.”

“Better than their chances of working magic,” smiled Mistra, catching his thought that blasters, the weapon suggested by a band that possessed elementary transporter technology, would have a range unmatched by any of their own “civilized” weapons. “Still...” She ran a finger around the inside of the wristband she always wore—the sort of accessory one accepts in a warrior without wondering if it has a use beyond the obvious one of protecting the limbs. She pulled out what looked like a tiny blaster, no larger than her fingernail, then glared at the bard as he burst out laughing.

“And what exactly were you planning on doing with that?” he chortled. “Giving their beards a trim? Did you think they carted dolls around with them that liked to play at City Watch and Robbers?”

The glare subsided, and she answered with thinly veiled humor. “I keep forgetting the Thalacian propensity to confuse bigger with better.” And the blaster expanded in a trice to full, lethal size. “Better for a small scouting party to reconnoiter while we have them in sight, don’t you think?” She directed this slightly more toward Mosaia than anyone else.

“Yes,” Mosaia agreed. “I will go with Deneth if you will stay to help guard the others.” He politely indicated he did not want to take the blaster when she offered it. If she took umbrage at the way he named Deneth as comrade and herself as guardian of the weaker members of the party, she chose not to make an issue of it.

“You could use a thief,” Habie pointed out.

Deneth laughed. “Hey, he’s got *me*. Let the rookie scout the terrain. Then you as master—or mistress—can come in and deliver the *coup de grace*.”

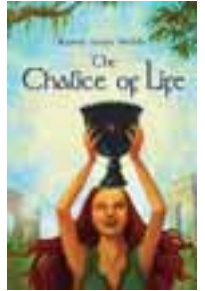
And off they went.

“We should look for shelter in a defensible spot,” said Mistra. “What do you think, Sally?”

“Gee, you guys are serious, aren’t you?” she asked incredulously.

“Can you not sense the evil in the air these past few minutes?” asked T’Cru in what they came to call his “poor little human cub” voice.

“Advanced as your technology is,” said Mistra, “it is in its infancy. Unfortunately, there are those whose technology eclipses yours at the same time their sense of morality makes you look like the divine given human form.” And she led them in the opposite direction with such stealth that she surprised a wave of pride from Habie, as if the tiny thief were pleased to know her for this one attribute alone. Acting out of practicality, she chose two intact adjacent walls of a nearby dwelling as their best chance for defensible cover. If the two men were to herd or lure the intruders this way, as seemed likely, it would give the rest of the party a fair shot of pinning



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them and picking them off one by one. She placed Sally in the corner formed by the meeting of the two walls as the least vulnerable spot, then gestured the others into a loose fan along both walls. If any of them objected to her deploying them, he kept the opinion to himself.

They had come uphill slightly to reach the place; windows afforded them a view of the maze of streets that lay between them and the smugglers. Deneth and Mosaia, she thought, must be down there somewhere. She could do no better than to feel for them with her mind: despite their short acquaintance, she could sense them like two frail points of light slipping cautiously toward the darkness ahead. Looking across that maze she noted that the intruders had not yet moved from the spot where they had transported in. There seemed to be some confusion over their instrument readings, or over what course they should take. The ensuing discussion did not look friendly. *Good!* she thought—their conflict would buy Deneth and Mosaia some time. The scene reminded her of an axiom she had developed in the course of her travels. That was that good had one consistent advantage over the evil with which it contended: people dedicated to the common weal, even the most gifted, would work easily together, even if it meant sacrificing personal power and the chance for glory, where evil folk (even those of little merit) constantly strove with one another for supremacy.

Beside her, Sally drew both her guns, offering one to Alla, the one among them who was, to all appearances, unarmed. Mistra felt another wave of pity for the archaeologist. The strained look on her face said she was still wrestling with the thought that hers was not the best of all possible worlds.

“No, thank you,” said the shape-changer. “If it comes to wounding or taking life, I will do it as do my brothers and sisters of the forest, in league with T’Cru, if he will have me.”

“An honor and a privilege,” the Tigroid said with a formal bow.

At Mistra’s nod, Alla slipped off. “You mean she’s going to turn into something like *him* -er- *you*?” Sally asked wide-eyed, addressing Mistra first in her consternation, then quickly correcting herself.

“We have not yet seen the fair Alla take the shape of a woodland creature, yet she tells us her preferred form is that of a great cat like unto myself.”

“I see!” Although it looked like the effort cost her, she did not pale or grow faint at this news. Presently, Alla returned as a great hunting cat as pure white as T’Cru was black; her liquid eyes were the color of the sky at noon. Mistra felt her eyes widen involuntarily, but it was T’Cru who put her own sentiment into words.

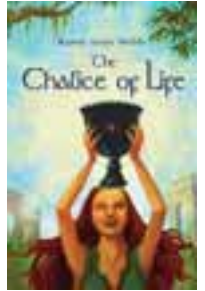
“Madame, I am overwhelmed!” he said, awestruck. “To think a color as antithetical to pure black as pure white could take such a delightful shape. It quite makes me rethink my opinion of the way the Stag appears on my coat!” He did not intend the left-handed nature of the compliment, and Alla preened a little as if T’Cru had simply said she was the most exquisite creature he had ever laid eyes on.

A splash in the Ether made Mistra attend to her evaluation of what

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their absent companions were doing. “Heads up, folks,” she said, “I think Deneth and Mosaia are just making contact with our intruders, but I can’t get much more than a fix on their position. Habie, or any of you, can you do any better than I can at reading what they’re thinking or feeling at this distance?” Hearing only three replies, she looked up. “Habie?”

“She’s gone,” Alla informed them.



Mosaia and Deneth, feeling the comradely warmth that only comes of doing something suicidal together, stole warily through the streets in the direction of the transport beams. The configuration of the buildings enabled them to keep the newcomers in sight till they were almost on top of them while staying out of sight themselves. Evidently, the smugglers had no reason to believe they might not be alone, for they had set no watch and taken no precautions. One was holding out a scanner and saying, “No mineral readings besides ordinary rocks at this level, captain.”

“Then we’d better find a way into this here undercity, hadn’t we?” said a swarthy fellow who seemed to be the leader. He was the best dressed of the lot, though all of them wore the “uniform” basic to so many human smugglers the cosmos over: worn but supple boots, breeches, varying degrees of cover for the upper torso and arms, ostentatious jewelry, and small arsenals in the guise of belts and baldrics. This lot looked less scruffy than most but no less mean.

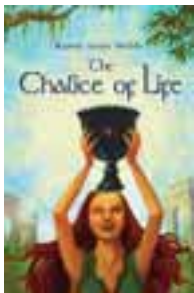
“Sonar from the ship showed a few weaknesses in the crust near here,” said a third. “We should ferret out one of those, eh?”

“Well, I expect I didn’t hope to find a sign saying ‘This way to the mines.’” He fiddled with a sensor of his own, then pointed to a convenient looking lane. “Right. This way, lads, but quiet-like. I don’t want to find any of those faults by us starting an avalanche.”

Deneth and Mosaia exchanged a glance’s worth of unspoken communication. They found, as Mistra had, that they could communicate remarkably well considering the relative paucity of time they had spent in each other’s company. Without Mosaia speaking a word, Deneth grasped the course of action he was suggesting. He nodded, happy to let Mosaia take the lead: the paladin was, after all, the one with all the real military experience, and he seemed plenty savvy for a holy knight!

They made very sure of their cover when it became clear that the pirates were heading in their general direction, let the small band pass them by, then followed, Mosaia hugging one wall of the lane and Deneth the other. They were able to keep the entire band in sight, while still remaining unobserved themselves, till a final turning. They listened. They nodded, each to assure the other that he had heard no sound that suggested the band had split in an effort to flank them. Pressing tightly against the wall before that final turning, they listened once more to assure themselves they could hear the sounds of the entire band conversing quietly. A final nod, and they rounded a corner into what turned out to be a blind alley. Before them stood the leader, fiddling nonchalantly with his sensor. A

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number of his cronies were also standing around, but a quick head count told Deneth and Mosaia that several were missing.

Behind them, they heard a soft hum. They turned to see the missing members of the band step virtually out of the Ether to cut off their escape.

“Out of curiosity,” Deneth grumbled, “just *how* closely were your parents related?” to which Mosaia shrugged, a look of chagrin on his face.

When she followed Deneth and Mosaia, Habie had taken advantage of the fact that Mistra had led them onto a rise. With careful maneuvering, she was able to go from lane to wall to rooftop as the land fell away. By the time the terrain had leveled, she had dropped no more than a meter from the elevation at which she had started. She uttered a tentative thanks to Strephele—that was who Mistra said people engaged in chancy pursuits like gambling prayed to—that she had not gorged herself while she had been a guest in the palace, otherwise the crumbling walls would not have supported even her insubstantial weight. Since they did support her, though, she had a good view of where she was going, a fair if intermittent view of where Deneth and Mosaia were headed, and an excellent view of the direction in which the pirates had moved when they had left their transport point.

She had been making a wide arc, tailing the two men only obliquely, so she could scout the lie of the land in case they got into trouble. “*Coup de grace*, my Aunt Hattie’s hindquarters,” she grouched. “If I’ve read Mosaia right, he’ll want to make a frontal attack on the whole bunch of them, and Deneth’ll be right behind him just to see how many he can take in hand-to-hand combat all at once because it’ll look good in his memoirs some day. To the Seventh Hell with scouting! It’ll take a mistress of *skulking* just to give them an even chance of not getting killed.”

Her words proved prophetic, for she had a fine view of the trap the pirates had laid—saw them gesture to one another as they laid it, saw several of the band manipulate some sort of device and simply fade from view—and of Deneth and Mosaia as they walked into it. Abandoning stealth and trusting to her size and odd approach to keep her hidden long enough to get into position, she scampered ahead till a single wall separated her from the pirates.

Deneth, after making the remark about Mosaia’s parentage, swore to himself. *They have transporter technology*, he thought, *I should have guessed they might have some gadgets that could let them go in and out of phase*. He also thought, *I always reckoned we’d be fighting for our lives at some point, just not this soon, or against these odds!* Surreptitiously, he moved to loosen in their sheaths a cadre of concealed daggers concealed about his person. He also started to sweat.

“Hello, maties,” the leader greeted. “Been following me, I see.

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Archaeological finds bring out the most interesting sorts. Fancied you'd be using those nice swords, did you?" It was the sort of geniality with which an assassin truly enamored of his work slips his knife between his victim's ribs.

"Only if you mean to harm us," Mosaia said. "We mean you no harm, though perhaps we would have done better to announce ourselves openly."

His voice would soothe an active volcano, Deneth thought of his comrade. *On the other hand, there's more menace in his sense of dignity than in this smuggler chief's taunts.* Despite the way his muscles were tensing for battle, he had to laugh at himself. *I guess I can learn something from this holy knight. Silver tongue or no, with these odds, I'd have just given a battle cry and started laying about me with my sword. Maybe his parent's weren't that closely related!*

"What's your business here?" continued the smuggler.

"We seek the gem mine as well," Mosaia continued, "but only to take enough of the gems to cure a malady afflicting the dragons that live to the south of this land."

He emitted a hearty laugh, but it was not a pleasant sound. "Well, that's a good one, matey, and no mistake! Not going to mention how Black Jack and his gang nipped in for a little thievery and contraband activity?"

"Not if you refrain from saying the same about us. There is much here that should be preserved for the sake of history, but no one truly *owns* this place, therefore no one can truly be said to be stealing from it."

Deneth arched an eyebrow. *There's an argument I didn't expect to hear from a holy knight—half logic and half sophistry. Maybe he's learned something from being around me!*

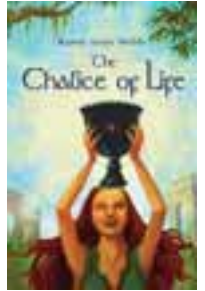
Setting down the sensor, Jack drew his dagger and pointed it at Mosaia's chest. "You know, I almost like you, whoever or *whatever* you are. Bit of a loose end, though, aren't you? How many jewels does it take to cure a dragon, let alone a whole country of them?"

Oh, drek! thought Deneth in alarm. *There went Mosaia's grip on the conversation. If I don't jump in quickly and improve this bloke's humor, we may still have to fight our way out of this.* "You know..." he said in an attempt to run interference. His thought was that, if reason had failed, it was time to move on to bargaining with largesse. "You're acting like the mine is found already. It's not. We could help each other. It so happens that we have a clue to the mine's whereabouts. You, on the other hand, have a sensor..."

"Not any more he doesn't!" shouted Habie. With no warning, the little thief had appeared atop the wall that formed the cul-de-sac. Now she capered about, brandishing in one hand the sensor Jack had been using, in the other the length of weighted cord she had used to filch it. "Want it back? Come and get it!" And she was gone as quickly as she had appeared.

"Has an eye for quality, I'll say that," Jack mused in the instant before he ordered his men to forget Deneth and Mosaia and give chase. They tore past Mosaia and Deneth, almost bowling them over in their haste to pursue.

"That must be some sensor," Deneth remarked, "for him to forget



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about us so completely.”

“Perhaps it was something that located the gems for them, even if the mine is far underground.”

Deneth grinned. “Then Habie just made our work easier, besides saving our hides.”

“Except—”

“Yeah?”

“She’s leading them back in the direction of our friends!” Before the words were out of his mouth, he had started a mad dash back up the alley.

Well, thought Deneth as he went charging after the knight, *all that extra adrenaline was making my muscles stiff anyway*.

Luckily, catching up with the smugglers meant backtracking their original route, so they already had a mental picture of the area that the pirates lacked. Little by little, they gained.

“Oh, this is bad!” Deneth cried as he inched ahead of Mosaia and rounded a corner.

“What?” called Mosaia.

“They’re pulling their blasters—and firing at Habie! The little fool! She’s staying in plain sight to draw their fire.”

“Mistra and the others may have laid an ambush.”

Deneth winced as he saw blaster fire pelt the ground to either side of the tiny figure. Habie, small and nimble as she was, made a poor target. Still, the odds favored at least one bolt from that rain of fire striking her eventually. “She’ll be fried in sight of the home stretch!” His brain pounded out a message that repeated over and over like a mantra: *Do something, do something, do something!* Ah, he had it! “Come on!” he shouted, grabbing the paladin’s arm and almost yanking it out of its socket as he abruptly changed directions. “I can get us between them and her.”

By combining his facility with spatial relationships with some fancy gymnastics, Deneth now led them so they were able to do just that. They came rocketing out of a side street to find Habie just crossing their path. “YAAAAAAAAA” Deneth heard himself cry as the blaster fire began to fall around *him*. *Guess I’ll have to sort out later if this was brave or clever, or I’m just courting a death wish*, he thought as he picked up the pace. Ahead of Habie, Mistra and the others were stepping into view and assuming defensive postures. Others? He recognized T’Cru, but where had that big white cat come from? *Who cares?* he thought. *It looks as ferocious as T’Cru. And it seems to be on our side!*

“Move it, you guys!” he heard Habie call from where she stood just meters ahead. But his eye was drawn to Mistra, who had grounded her sword point and assumed an expression of fierce concentration.

“Well,” Mistra groaned as she noticed the approaching throng, “there’s a plan that was better in conception than execution. How many, T’Cru?”

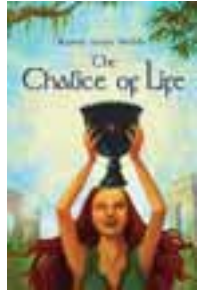
“Eight, all armed with blasters,” he replied. “The rest broke off to close with our comrades from the opposite direction, I think.”

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She thought quickly. "Alla, T'Cru, flank me and get ready to spring. Torreb, take Sally and cover me and the other end of the street as well as you can. I'll try to set up a shield for us." They followed her outside the makeshift shelter and took up their positions.

Habie and her pursuers had entered a broad square that was the final approach to the spot where her friends waited. Mistra wove the boundaries of the spell irregularly so they would reach out like pseudopodia to engulf her friends, then contract inward with them as they ran. That was the easy part. Simultaneously blocking the blaster fire was tricky. Magical energies tended to bounce off shields as a cudgel might off a balloon, while electrical energies like blaster fire were focused enough to breach a shield the way an arrow might pierce the same balloon. There, Habie was through. Now Deneth. Now Mosaia, making sure the other two were safe before he entered the zone himself. She let the spell enfold all of them like a net.

But the raw energy of the hastily wrought spell proved to be too much for the ground on which she had worked it. "Fault line!" she barely heard the smugglers shout in the roar that came as the ground buckled around her. It tilted crazily, popping random groups of people and things into slots beneath the surface like so many letters being pigeonholed in a desk. The last image she saw before she fell was the smugglers trying unsuccessfully to flee the quaking ground.



Mistra landed with a thud and a grunt. Her descent had turned into more of a controlled slide than a fall, so she was merely winded. What she had landed on felt like packed earth. She could sense no one nearby—a most desolate feeling when one has landed in total darkness after an unexpected fall. It was chiefly Tuhl's reassurances that there would always be a way through if they worked together that gave her solace in that brief moment of gloom.

Come on, Mistra, she said to herself, *you've been in far worse situations than finding yourself alone in the dark. Let's be about it.* She took a moment to utter a silent prayer to Minissa, then began to take stock of her situation.

She was just getting her bearings when she heard two more thuds nearby. She felt for her blaster and her sword before calling out a tentative "Hello?" but she was answered, to her relief, by Mosaia and Deneth.

"Nice work, Princess." That was Deneth, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Don't berate Mistra!" Mosaia said sharply. "It's the first access we've found to the underground. Mistra, I've a torch here, if you'll oblige me." She did. The torch blazed forth instantly, then settled down to a homey glow. "And seven or eight with honorable weapons can still be no match for an equal number with blasters. She just may have saved our lives." He bowed to her. "Lady, I at least salute you."

"The universe is repaying me for an unkind thought," she observed with a wan laugh. "I had just been saying your plan to reconnoiter was better in conception than execution; I suppose my attempt to protect us all

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was as well.”

Deneth grunted what may have been an affirmative, then said, “BICTE.”

“What?” asked Mistra and Mosaia together. Both were wondering if the fall had addled their companion’s wits.

“BICTE,” he repeated with greater conviction. “Better In Conception Than Execution. I like it. I think I’ll hang onto it, if Mistra doesn’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she replied with a short laugh, “but the situation may be WOTUT: WORSE Than You Think: I think the smugglers were chuted down here as well.”

“Then at the least, we are equally disadvantaged,” said Mosaia. “Indeed, I doubt they had access to such a quick source of light.”

She rose, stretching her back and rubbing a few places that had gotten jarred in the slide. “For my own part, I salute Thalybdenos that none of us sustained any broken bones. What?” she asked Mosaia. He was looking around, puzzled.

“My sword,” he replied. “Has either of you seen it? It was jarred from my hand when the earth quaked.”

“Yeah, there it is,” said Deneth. It had come to rest, strangely, hilt upward against a nearby wall. Something about its exact positioning struck all three of them as prim. “It looks like it’s standing at attention,” he laughed as he reached for it. An instant later, he recoiled when a voice rang out in the darkness.

“Unhand me, knave!” shrieked the voice. “Not if my true master were dead, buried, and gone to his eternal rest would I let you sully my hilt with your vile touch!”

Mistra registered what she supposed was less alarm than the men, but no less surprise. From the looks in their faces, they had come to no different conclusion than she: it was the sword that had spoken!

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Sally groaned. For a brief moment when she had seen the ground begin to open, she had been certain she was hallucinating. The certainty had lapsed into fervent hope, then into disbelief, and finally into fear as she had felt herself falling. There were certain excitements that went along with being on a dig, but falling through the earth’s crust was not supposed to be one of them!

“H-hello?” she ventured. She had expected to see shafts of sunlight pouring in from above, but in the darkness that surrounded her, she could barely make out her hand before her face. She must somehow have been shunted away from the path her fall had taken, away from the fracture through which she had tumbled headlong, away from light and friends and—yes—hope. There was no rational reason to believe that any of the others had fallen in the same direction she had, that any of them had survived. This could easily be her last hour of life! Well, she thought, if it *was* to be her final hour, she could at least try to go down doing what she did best—poking around in the dark with few clues to guide her. Hadn’t she

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just minutes before been despairing of finding a way into the area below the deserted Hamani city? If she knew nothing else about her surroundings, she knew that they (and, therefore, she) lay beneath the ruin. If death were the price for coming where her heart had led her, then so be it.

She dusted herself off and stood carefully, brushing her head against some sort of stone arch as she did so. Her eyes were just becoming adjusted to the dark when she saw a black shadow move across her field of vision (such as it was). She had jumped and hit her head on the arch before she realized it was nothing worse than T'Cru.

"Ah," he said. "Lady Sally. Are you harmed?"

Her entire being flooded with relief. Now she would at least not die alone. "No, just a little bruised." She squinted at him. "How could you make me out so easily?"

"We felines have vision that is superior to that of most humanoids, especially in dim light."

"Then, if Alla hasn't changed back, perhaps she will find us."

"Here I am!" Alla purred. She stepped through another arch. "T'Cru, although you and I can see, I think Sally needs a little real light." She stretched, then shook herself vigorously. From her coat welled a pale radiance. It did not have a wide range, but it was plenty to steer by.

This was better and better, thought Sally. If two might do no more than lay down and die together, three struck her as a number that might stand a chance of finding a way out. The thought heartened her, and she was able to attend to the feeling of cognitive dissonance that had threatened to overwhelm her from the moment she met this peculiar party. She sighed and placed her hands on her hips. "You people certainly challenge every idea I've ever had about what's strange or silly or downright impossible. I don't suppose it was all that pounding up the pavement that caused the earthquake?" she asked, purposely mingling a little hope with the irony.

"I think not," T'Cru said in what must have been his most diplomatically aristocratic tones. At least, that what she had always imagined aristocrats in books about the Foretimes sounding like, at least if they were trying to be nice.

Now she could attend to the little voice inside her that said that all the strangeness in her new friends was the sort of strangeness she had always hoped existed but had written off long ago as a fancy of childhood. "Was it—was it—?" An instant after she had framed the thought, she was shying away from confronting it.

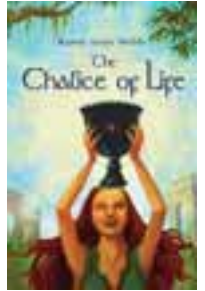
"My dear, unless you have a concept of at least the mental disciplines, I think that is a question you would rather not ask just yet."

"Not technology like what transported those smugglers from—wherever they came from?" She shied from thinking about that, too.

He shook his head. "Suffice it to say that there are realities in the cosmos that differ significantly from your own."

"And that they do not all belong to creatures who differ significantly from you in appearance," Alla added.

"OK," she said, blowing a breath out through lips that had formed a



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little “o.” Inherent in the breath was the thought that she needed to wrap her mind around something it could grasp without bending itself into too many angles.

She appraised her surroundings, then said aloud, “This looks like a waymeet of some sort. A crossroads.” By the light of Alla’s coat, she could see four archways carved from four walls that reached up to a dome high above. They demarcated a square where four cobblestone streets intersected. Beyond the archways, the roads continued off into the dim light. “I wonder...” She peered out one of the archways. Lining the narrow street were building after building—small, quaint, made of good stone well laid, and sporting signs depicting various trades in runes or pictures. “I guess we’ve made it to the undercity, to the heart of the Hamani realm. Maybe our interpretation of those pictographs wasn’t so far off, if that landslide was what it took to get us down here—whatever caused it. We must be in what was once the business district.”

Habie had landed in a roll and come to a stop prone. Although she was barely winded, she stayed still a moment, straining all of her keen senses to discover what sort of situation she had landed in. She was just beginning to put it all together when a light flared ahead of her and to her left—a flat-bottomed argus like the sun would give if it were just cresting the horizon. She was glad she had taken the precaution of looking and listening before she moved, for as she inched toward the light and its shape changed, she found she had landed on the roof of a low building. A misstep in the dark might have netted her a broken leg.

“Well, kid,” she whispered to herself, “you thought a life of adventure would beat running from the clans. Joke’s on you.” That much came out in a rueful tone. She felt sorry for herself for all of three seconds, after which she pulled herself together. “I said I wanted to put my skills to work to help these nice people who took me in. I guess now’s the time. At least, it would be if I knew where they all went.”

Figuring that staying put was helping no one but, if she moved, she might find a meaningful way to contribute to an adventure turned disastrous, she squirmed forward on her belly. As she came to the edge of the rooftop, she saw the small group of pirates conferring by the light of an electric lantern. They were grumbling about the loss of the sensor. Realizing she still possessed something of value to them put Habie in a better frame of mind. On the other hand, the longer they talked, the more clearly they were seeing the possibilities inherent in having landed by whatever devices in the subterranean village. Surely, the mine entrance must lay nearby.

“What about that other lot, though?” one of them wanted to know. “We saw them chuted down here just before the quake took us as well.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Black Jack reassured them. “We know we outgun them, and that sorceress will think twice about throwing spells around after causing that cave-in. Let’s move it.”

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Habie briefly considered her options. Following the pirates easily won out over looking for her vanished comrades.

“What vile spirit...?” Mosaia began.

“Vile?” This from the sword. “Vile?”

“Not vile,” Mistra chuckled, “or it would have let Deneth handle it.”

“Oh, thanks,” said Deneth, but his demeanor softened when he caught the way her eyes twinkled.

“Tsk. Look.” She laid a hand on its hilt. It sighed in a way that said that, had it been a cat, it would be curling up in her lap and purring contentedly. She rippled her fingers beneath its quillions as one would scratch a cat under its chin, and the suggestion intensified. “This must have been Tuhl’s little joke. I should have remembered that a blade consecrated as a Retributor and forged in the Union is likely to be sentient, and melodramatic to boot if Phino and Strepel had a hand in its forging—our deities of the performing arts and humor,” she explained for Mosaia’s sake.

“Me, too,” Deneth added. “Even though my home world abjures the use of the Art as unbecoming in a warrior race, this is the kind of thing a bard takes in practically with mother’s milk.”

“One of us should have thought to clue you in.”

“I am recompensed for having stated the unstateable yesterday,” he replied congenially. “We are again reminded how little we can assume about one another’s cultures!”

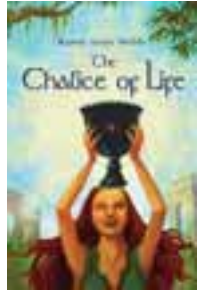
“Rumor has it,” Mistra went on, “that the ones that *are* sentient are really drawn from a class of—well—spirit helpers that were created by the One at the dawn of time to help the Pantheon.”

“What a poetic thought!” enthused the paladin.

“I’ve always thought so. Each deity was supposed to have had a small number of these *kanami* created just for him to help shape our corner of the cosmos. Some are said to take human form and come among men as prophets, or the prime movers of great events, or shapers of critical moments in history.” She petted the sword. “And some consented to be encased in the form of weapons or other constructs so they were not bound to a single time period but would move from the side of one great hero to the next and bridge the gap from epoch to epoch.”

“They, in effect, help the helpers,” said Deneth.

“How fascinating!” said Mosaia. “Perhaps your Eliander will prove to be one of these—indeed, perhaps you and Deneth here and all the rest are such, for you are great heroes already, even if you die in this moment, for having essayed this quest: arising is a mighty deed, for is not the task complete in essence when the first step is made?” He looked thoughtful; if he noticed the look the other two exchanged, he did not react to it as he continued with his musings. “Perhaps in this embodiment of which you speak lies the true secret of the Orbs; it may be the best answer to the riddle of whether or not they are alive, and why they behave as sentient beings when they appear as a construct of the mineral kingdom.”



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Mistra cocked an eyebrow. “That’s the best explanation I’ve ever heard for them,” she admitted with a grin, though she gestured to negate the thought that she might be numbered among that august company of spirit folk (the thought that Deneth or Eliander might be, though, was one she did not deride). “You are adapting with remarkable speed to the world I was born into and still don’t completely comprehend!” She hefted the sword and proffered it him.

He reached for the sword, but hesitantly, stopping just short of grasping the hilt. “It’s quite -um- safe? Good? None of these spirits served other than what you call the One, or your Pantheon, or had mischief as an inherent part of its nature?”

“I was consecrated to Ereb, god of justice and war in a righteous cause, practically before I was forged,” the sword chimed in with the rounded tones of a bard declaiming. “Ereb in his almighty wisdom laid on me the charge to go forth and combat evil wherever I encounter it and to yield myself willingly to the hands into which he would deliver me from time to time, though they be not be those of the children of doomed Thalybdenos. It need not be said that the mightier the hand that wields me and the higher the heart that beats within his breast, the more willingly I go! I will quote you my lineage, if you wish, so you see that I have never yet yielded myself to the likes of yon—”

“That will not be necessary. I’m sure it is a worthy lineage if you are consecrated thus.” He put a hand to his brow. “I don’t believe this,” he muttered. “I’m talking to a sword.” Then, to the sword: “Why did you not speak earlier?”

Its quillions shivered a little, as if it were shrugging. “There seemed to be little to say, my lord,” it said simply.

“Of course,” Deneth muttered. “That explains everything.”

“And as my lord is from a world where I understand swords do not commonly speak with their masters, I thought it best to wait till a propitious moment arose. But when yonder knave sought to lay hands on me and neither you nor the Princess sought to forestall him by any means at your disposal, I thought it best to make known that quality of sentience that sets me apart from blades of less merit.”

“‘Yonder’ is less ‘knave’ than you think,” Mistra came to Deneth’s defense. “We must have Mosaia unsheathe you the next time Deneth plays his lute so you can hear the nuances of the angelic in his music.”

“It is true,” the sword sighed dolefully, as if, while it did not agree with her assessment of Deneth’s character, it would not give the lie to a highborn lady (at least, not to her face). “My senses are woefully dimmed when I am in my scabbard, and I cannot speak at all.”

“Well, I bid you hold your -er- tongue no longer,” Mosaia instructed the blade, “if you have counsel to give. Only—do you acknowledge me as your master, however temporarily?”

“Of course, my lord!” the blade answered with enthusiasm.

“Then I, too, bid you be not so vitriolic with Deneth, nor with our young friend Habadiah. They have not dedicated their lives to the pursuit of chivalry as I have, yet there is in them, I warrant, only good. We shall

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certainly be encountering true evil enough to sate you in the near future, if it is your wish to combat it.”

The ghost of a smile crept across Deneth’s lips. “You may have given it an ethical problem, Mose, ordering it to be nice to me against its nature. Maybe it will tolerate my presence, but suppose I were forced to *draw* it in your absence—”

“Ereb forbid!” fumed the Retributor.

“—to defend the rest of the party against a demon or a tarrasque or something equally nasty. Which dictum would it follow? Which evil would be greater, to let an unrighteous hand wield it or to allow the entire party to perish?” His eyes twinkled with mischief.

“A contrived situation, varlet! Nevertheless, I shall endure your company if my master and the lady wish it, Thalacian of the Latter Days though you be, till I have seen for myself if your quality of character offsets the flaws of your racial stock.”

“Oh, thank you!” At his histrionic best.

“Gentlem-er-*beings*,” Mistra cut in, though she wondered about the distinction the sword had just made about Deneth’s ethnicity. “Can we be about it? I chuted those pirates down here, too, and, Retributor or no, we’re not armed as well as they are.”

“Yes,” agreed Mosaia. “We must get our bearings and get ourselves on the offensive.”

By the light of Mosaia’s torch, they made their way out of the nondescript chamber into which they had fallen into the last thing they had expected to find: a well-paved street. They saw now that the building from which they had emerged was marked as a barbershop. They thought they could descry a town square in the distance, but they decided against investigating it in favor of checking the opposite end of the street. As they walked, they discovered that they were passing a row of grooming facilities of all sorts: baths, clothiers, and the like lay all around them, yet this did not have the air of a section of town where the elite might have come for their own care.

“Something doesn’t sit right about this,” was Mosaia’s comment. “It seems hedonistic, almost decadent, even deserted as it is. There is an air about the place...”

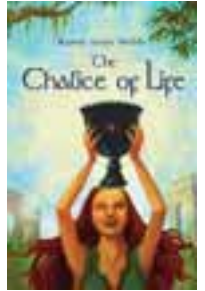
“Tsk,” Deneth scoffed. “It’s a bunch of old buildings, Mose. How can—?” The sound died on his lips. He had felt something cold and clammy, something angry and profoundly miserable brush past him.

“Guys!” called Mistra, who had ranged on ahead. “Come look at this!” She was standing at the end of the rows of buildings, at which point the street broadened into a wide square. An immense block—perhaps a platform of some sort—dominated the center of the square. Across from the entrance to the place was a slatted building that looked like a corral.

“A cattle market?” ventured Deneth, taking in the pens and the block but knowing the instant he said it he was on the wrong track.

Mosaia frowned. “It feels wrong.”

Mistra laughed. “My talents are wearing off on you, Mosaia.”



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“Well, don’t you *feel* it?”

Her face conceded the point. The three of them drew together as they crossed the square. None of them took the initiative to suggest a way to deploy should danger threaten—the place was empty, after all, and quiet as a tomb in midwinter. Yet from the way in which they formed their small knot, they would have taken no more than a single step each to fall into a back-to-back fighting posture. Cautiously, they moved forward to investigate the block. Mosaia held the torch high as they looked around. Chains were bolted to all of the walls—chains too high and narrow to have been meant for livestock but of a perfect height to have enclosed a human neck and limbs.

“A slave market,” Mistra whispered in horror.

Torreb woke to find himself lying on a broad stairway. Behind him, all lay in darkness, but ahead, up the stairs, lay a magnificent temple bathed, as it seemed, in its own radiance. At the top of a flight of many shallow stairs, there rose up columns in row upon row supporting a wide stone canopy. Beyond that stood an archway leading to the single expansive room that formed the temple proper.

“Well,” Torreb said to himself as he rose and smoothed his robes. “Well.” It was all he could think to say for a long while. He looked around and wondered briefly where the others were. He suddenly felt very timid, what with the unending blackness behind him and the intimidating mass of gleaming masonry before him. He weighed in his mind whether to stay put or to explore, and, after brief deliberation, decided both that exploring was the better alternative and that, being a cleric, he could cope more easily with the temple than with whatever lay behind him in the darkness.

“Dear Minissa!” he breathed as he ascended the stairs. “Why did you lay on me the burden of this quest? What good will I ever do you? I am a simple scholar, not a great knight and hero like Mosaia. It’s a mystery to me why I was consecrated to Ereb and accepted into his service. They should have just sent me to the temple of Cilio, where I could have pursued my studies to my heart’s content, or to the temple of Thalybdenos, where I could have contented myself learning all there was to know about healing.” He expected no overt answer to any of this, which is fortunate, for he received none. But his heart, so downcast when he had come to rest on this island of light in a sea of darkness, began to lighten a very little bit. Still, as he plunged ahead, he shook his head at his perceived folly for having become involved in this quest at all. Except for the sound of his own breathing, which roared in his ears like a passing freight train, it was absolutely silent.

When he reached the top of the stair, he found that interspersed among the columns stood statues. Each bore a plaque of some sort at its base. A little voice inside him squealed in excitement. *A mystery!* it said. *An historical mystery to be solved! And knowledge to be gained!* His heart lightened considerably at this thought as he approached the statues: maybe

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there was a way a simple scholar could be of use on this adventure after all.

The legends on the plaques had been graven in a strange alphabet. As he looked at the first, the letters swam a little before his eyes, then resolved into Galactic Common, though he could not for the life of him have said why. The figures, who were dressed in loincloths and other brief garb not unlike that worn by the Carotians, appeared to be representations of the various headmen and women who had ruled this land. All bore staves, each carved with devices that suggested to him that the figures had wielded civil as well as religious authority. These were, then, the philosopher kings and queens that Sally had described. From the expressions on the faces of the first half dozen or so, Torreb thought that Sally's thesis about the Hamani must be accurate: they certainly looked like figures for whom truth and justice and peace held meaning.

"I wonder what sort of society yours was, then," he mused aloud, stopping in front of one of the statues. But his words echoed eerily about the terrace, and he had the uneasy feeling he was being watched.

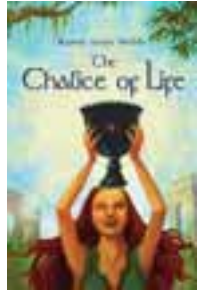
He moved on, continuing to study the statues as he walked. Another half-dozen and their faces began to look less like those of rulers who valued peace and justice. Half a dozen more and they began to look like conquerors, but like conquerors who would only seek to expand if adding territory would somehow benefit the Hamani people: they would kill efficiently and never revel in carnage for its own sake. The last few, however, looked like they would wage war for the glory of conquest alone; the more they could make their foes suffer, the better they would like it. Torreb could only shake his head in dismay at what was to the Carotians and Eremites the ultimate in misspent effort.

The feeling of watchfulness now grew into one of expectancy. There seemed to be no hostility there, and Torreb found himself hindered in no way, yet he felt compelled to turn around and look behind him or from side to side periodically to see if anyone were observing him. He clutched the Balance tightly in one hand, as if it were a shield, but forbore to draw his mace.

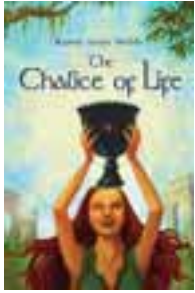
He reached the archway without incident. The temple proper was one massive square room. Dominating the place was a circular altar that stood as close to the center of the room as made no odds. As Torreb approached, he saw that, rather than having the flat surface that he would have expected from an altar, the structure circumscribed a hollow area like a great well. Several feet below floor level, Torreb fancied he could see a pool of water.

He grunted. "Did they worship naiads, I wonder?" He plucked a loose stone from the altar and tossed it absently into the pool. Ripples fanned out from the place where it had broken the surface. For a brief moment, Torreb thought he saw a rainbow form above it, but he rubbed his eyes, and, when he looked again, it was no longer there. With a weary sigh, he sat on the side of the altar. He looked around and saw nothing else of interest. There was no other exit. The walls and ceiling were bare. Many long benches flanked the altar on all sides, but they were nondescript and empty.

Suddenly, he noticed a single torch burning in a sconce on the wall opposite the archway. Although it certainly was not the source of the



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temple's illumination, it was burning brightly enough that it would allow him to explore the unlit area beyond the temple were he to remove it from its scone. Brightening, he stood, marched up to the wall, and took the torch. He did not remark upon the fact that, if Sally's story about this civilization were accurate, the torch must have been burning for centuries without being tended and without consuming itself.

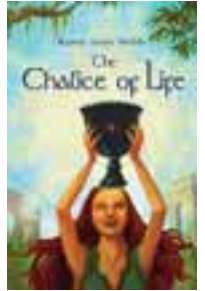
The moment he removed the torch from its scone, he heard behind him a churning sound. He turned. The well was steaming. He took a step forward, meaning to investigate, then sprang back: the small, gently billowing cloud of vapor abruptly collapsed in on itself as if a gigantic pair of lungs at the bottom of the well had just drawn a huge breath. A moment of stillness followed. He was about to take another step forward when the vapors returned without warning, not as gentle steam but as a geyser shooting high into the air with tremendous force. The vapor column hit its maximum height, then froze in place. At least, its height became no greater, although Torreb could see tendrils of steam swirling and roiling within, sparkling with all the colors of the rainbow.

And within that whirl of color, a face began to form.

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CHAPTER 7



Pieces of the Puzzle

“There are more things in heaven and on ASTRA, OR. Roarke,
than are dreamt of in your archaeology texts.”

—MISTRA to Sally

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Sally, Alla, and T’Cru found little that surprised them in their explorations till the entire cavern lit suddenly and without explanation. Sally and T’Cru started, but Alla said calmly, “Well, that makes *my* job easier.” With a ripple of her coat, she shifted back to her human form.

“What do you suppose happened?” asked Sally.

“An enchantment, perhaps. One of our friends must have wandered into the area that triggered it.”

“Then I hope he did not pay too dearly,” said T’Cru. The muscles at the back of his neck twitched as if he were shivering. “Or she. Can you not feel the watchfulness?”

“I feel *something*,” Alla admitted, “but it seems just that—watchful rather than malevolent.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “If it were possible, I’d say the very stones were listening.”

“That’s silly,” Sally tried to scoff at the thought, but her voice lacked conviction. Things she had been inclined to write off as silly or impossible as the day dawned were occurring all around her with alarming frequency! Her experiences on digs had always been so straightforward. Buildings had

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always been in complete ruins, and the only clues her team had ever discovered about the civilization they were investigating had been those yielded by the artifacts themselves. No stones had listened; no perfectly preserved cities had popped up out of nowhere; no adventurers or smugglers had appeared from thin air or claimed to come from places of which she had never heard. She shrugged. "Let's push on. I..." She broke off and cocked her head.

"What is it, Sally?" Alla began, then she, too, broke off. "Oh!" Just for a moment, several of the signs along the street had come alive with color. Their legends, or the paintings that suggested the nature of the businesses conducted inside the buildings to which they were attached, had heightened in clarity.

"All right," Sally said with determination and a little heat, "that's enough of this." No longer, she was broadcasting to anyone or anything who would listen to her emotional color, would she be intimidated (or even thrown off her game) by phenomena that refused to fit her paradigm. "Alla, did that one over there look to you like it was the place of business of a healer, or a wise woman or some such thing?"

Alla nodded.

T'Cru shrugged. "I saw the signs come to life, so to speak, but, although I can read some human script, human two-dimensional art means little to my folk. I will be glad to follow along at your direction, and to guard your backs while you investigate."

"Thank you, T'Cru," said Sally, and she marched up to the door with the authority of someone who meant to beat it into submission if it did not offer her immediate access to what lay beyond. Door and sign flipped back and forth between the vivid and the drab several times as the three of them moved toward it. Each time the colors became vivid, the trio had the impression that they had stepped into the middle of a busy street. Each time it went drab, they knew themselves to be back in the deserted undercity. "You know, I thought the heart of this empire would be far larger than this, but—" She broke off again as she put her hand to the doorknob. They did not so much cross the threshold as have the cottage reach out to engulf them, and as the building engulfed them, so did the past...

The elderly woman sat next to the bed stroking the brow of the child who lay there. Opposite her stood the child's parents, their hands clutched in one another's, tears on their faces.

"Can you help her, Mother Sagacity?" asked the man. "Can you save our daughter?"

Mother Sagacity nodded as sagely as her name implied she might. "That I can, Coram. It is a wise Priestess-Queen we live under. She listened when the Healer's Guild petitioned her that the Elixirs be distributed so we could use them to minister to the common people. Let the Priestess-Queen keep the aura of mystery and ceremony about the Gem Elixirs for the nobility and for the emissaries from afar! We simple wise women will tend those without whose labors the empire would fall!" Her chuckle was raspy but heartfelt. She rose and went to a nearby cupboard. Inside were five small vessels, one red, one green, one blue, one clear and one clear but with

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a shimmer like tiny rainbows. All were inscribed with a heart within which was etched a small hand. She took down the one punctuated by shimmers, pulled the tiniest of spoons from a cupboard drawer, and brought both to the bedside.

"Here you are, my dear," she said as the girl's mother propped her head up. "She needn't even be awake enough to swallow, and it will take but a drop. In a moment, she'll be right as rain, though you'll need to let her sleep as much as she wants for a few days."

As Sagacity had predicted, bare minutes after she had placed a drop of the Elixir on the child's tongue, the child awoke. Perspiration drenched her as her fever broke, but she came out of her stupor bright-eyed and cheerful.

"How can we ever thank you?" enthused the grateful parents.

"The spell that created these Elixirs will last in perpetuity, so the gem supply and supply of humors be maintained," replied the elderly woman. "I expect no reward for myself. Only find you someone who needs your help and cannot repay you, and do a kindness for him in my name..."

The three adventurers lurched as Sally let her hand fall and the scene imploded around them. "Oh, my stars!" exclaimed Sally, the first to recover. "Those people! They were dressed as early Hamani peasants! Have we—? Can we—?" She reached a hand forward as if to wrest the image back from its place in the normal flow of space-time. Her expression—one of inexplicable, inexorable loss—suggested that, if she could recall the scene for but an instant, she would jump inside and let it carry her back with it when it again faded from view.

"Those other realities seem to exist in the heart of your own world," observed T'Cru.

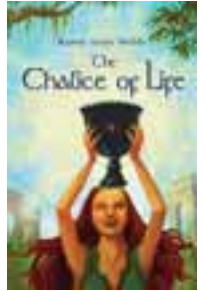
"We have just seen a slice of history unfold," Alla concluded. "I think Sally—was it in any way consistent with what your studies have shown?"

"Yes!" she replied, beaming. "Zargirt the Queen—the story goes that it was she who saved the lives of the monks of a neighboring kingdom—the Monks of Qirith-Nar, yes, that was it—when their sanctuary was attacked, and they were supposed to be the ones who created the chalice, as an act of gratitude. That tiny inscription on the vessels with the Elixirs—the hand within the heart—that was the symbol of their order."

"How early a view do you think we were getting?"

"Early—what we call Early Empire." She cast her eyes down demurely. "You know the way people have certain civilizations or time periods they're attracted to—times or places they can never rationally have visited or had their relatives come from but feel a kinship with anyway? The period beginning with Zargirt's rule is mine. If a time machine could truly exist, and if one popped up under my nose one day, and if the operator jumped out and asked if I wanted a lift to this place and time, I wouldn't bother to put my affairs in order. I wouldn't even bother to pack!" She glowed for a moment, absorbed by the pleasant vision of herself reborn as a citizen of the Empire.

"Are you so ill at ease in your own time, Sally?" Sympathy shone in the *Aranyaka's* eyes—who better to understand the plight of the misfit than one of Alla's own people?



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Sally looked for a moment like she might evade the question, or deflect it with humor. Then she simply said, “Yes. Why do you think I’m so absorbed by ancient culture?” she added with a wan smile. “There’s so little in my own time that inspires awe or wonder. It’s like there’s nothing left to discover—we’ve defined the limits of our own world and found there’s no room for mystery or magic, or even melodrama. We don’t even reach for the stars anymore because we know they’re just blobs of burning gas like our own sun.”

“So you find your inspiration in the heroic sagas of your past?” mused T’Cru. “Well, there are certainly worse places to go for inspiration! A monarch like your Zargirt who shares a treasure like these Elixirs so willingly with her people is certainly worthy of your attention—of your admiration! Indeed, a civilization governed by such a one does not seem to be the sort that would invite overnight destruction. Perhaps your interpretation has been the correct one all along.”

The archaeologist smiled gleefully. “I knew it! And I knew if we could ever really go back in time and see them in action, their civilization would be wonderful and peaceful and charitable and—I don’t know—*better* somehow than anything we have now. I mean, they *saved* this monastery that had nothing at all to do with their religion—that’s a maximally charitable act, right?—and got this wonderful chalice in return. That *has* to mean something. And, I mean, even if they were great warriors bent on conquest at some stage of their development, wouldn’t they eventually have had to return to those precepts of peace and justice that Zargirt must have espoused? Can a great civilization hold together if it’s a totalitarian state? Can a civilization that erects itself on the backs of slaves and sustains itself on their blood ever hope to stand the test of time?”

Alla and T’Cru exchanged a glance at this. Both obviously found their companion’s view refreshing—and both were obviously glad Deneth was not here to remark on it. The Thalacian civilization had done just that after Eliander had disappeared, holding together for several thousand years before the Toth dynasty had overreached itself and fallen a score of years ago.

Habie had, with more than her usual care, followed the smugglers along the street to its ultimate end. The whole crew must have been shunted down here and not just the eight that had pursued her down that last street: she counted about 20. They had traversed a residential district in which all of the houses had been deserted but perfectly preserved. They now stood at a rickety fence beyond which lay a graveyard.

“Bloody hell,” she heard one of them swear as she skulked in the shadow of the last building. “Bout face, eh?”

“Ar,” growled Jack. “And why should we do that, matey? This place is strange enough it might be this here graveyard has something to offer.” He pushed on the gate, which pulled off its hinges rather than opening, and led his grumbling companions inside.

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Habie followed. She was just small enough to sneak from one grave marker to the next without her quarry observing her. She heard them fussing and swearing a lot: apparently being a scourge of the spaceways conferred no protection against the fear of what lay beyond the grave! But, as they did little more than grouse, she eventually said to herself, *Boring!* and turned to go. However, just as she did so, she heard one of them use the term “magical.” Now, despite her cynicism about Carotians in general and her Lemurian relatives in particular, she dearly loved feats of magic and psionics, all the more so because she believed she had no facilities in either area. She (incorrectly) regarded her own empathic healing abilities as beneath notice. Fortunately, the fellow who had spoken was not easily put off by his comrades’ scoffing, and he went on chattering.

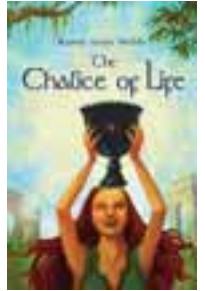
“Yeh, I’ve heard a thing or two about the gems in this here mine we’re looking for. Magical they are, and I don’t care what the rest of you say. I had it from my gran, and she knew a bit about magic, what with her herbs and concoctions and charms and whatnot. All sorts of effects they’re supposed to have—the gems, I mean. One for the rubies, one for the emeralds, one for the sapphires, and so on. Har, who knows what you could do if you had a handful of each kind, eh?”

“Retire, mate!” chuckled one of the others. “Buy me a planet, that’s what!”

“Well,” said Jack, “we’ll see the truth of it soon enough. Lots of each kind, we should have, and the sailing’ll be clearer and the pickings better if we can put an end to that other lot.”

Habie had gotten closer than she had meant to in an effort to hear. She was more chagrined than shocked, then, when all of a sudden the whole place lit up and the smugglers saw her. The sun might as well have appeared for the amount of light that was abruptly cast all about them. She saw no apparent source for all that radiance. From the way the shadows fell, it might have been coming equally from walls, floor, and the great dome that lay far above. She spent no time trying to reason any of it out but squeaked in the way that only startled Lemurians can and, reading certain mayhem and probably worse in the smugglers’ eyes, darted off in the direction in which she thought the gate lay.

But she had been disoriented by the light appearing so suddenly and so brightly from nowhere. She came abruptly to the edge of the graveyard. She saw no gate, but she did run into some sort of invisible obstruction beyond which lay oblivion. She groped along it without finding any break: it behaved as if it were a solid wall or force field. Blaster fire erupted around her. She knew they were firing blindly: the light had done that much good, dazzling their human eyes to a far greater extent than her Lemurian ones. She also knew that, even handicapped by the transient blindness caused by the light, they would be on her in seconds. But pursuit was nothing new to her, and she never lost her head, not even for an instant. Now that there was real light, she could see, several meters away, a dilapidated shack: perhaps it had once been a caretaker’s hut. Falling apart it might be, dank it might be, crawling with vermin it might be, but at this particular point in time, it struck her as beyond praise as a refuge.



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Thinking first to put the building between herself and pursuit, she rounded the near corner of the shack; casting about for inspiration, she noticed a broken window too small for a human to fit through. She reached in, slipped the latch, opened it, and popped inside. Her eye lit on the door. As much to confuse her pursuers as to see whether it would lock solidly, she hauled it open, slammed it, then threw the bolt. Just in time! She could hear them outside trying to work the lock on the door. She realized then the flaw in her plan: the place seemed to offer few places of concealment beyond shadows, and the door would certainly not resist a determined attack for long.

“Minissa,” she found herself whispering, to her own surprise, “if you—or anyone else—are really out there, this would be a good time to strut your stuff.” No sooner had the entreaty left her lips than she had to stifle an oath as she bumped into something square and solid. Outlining it hastily, she judged it to be the right size and shape for a storage trunk of some sort—one that would just admit a body of her mass. “Gee, like they’ll never figure this out,” she muttered even as she mulled over the possibility that, in the confusion, the pirates just might have mistaken her for one of the larger members of the party, none of whom the trunk would have fit at all. Pessimism warred with optimism for a moment, but in the end, desperation and a lack of alternatives made the choice for her.

The trunk was hung with a drape of some sort; this she slid back in such a way that she would be able to reposition it once she was inside. The trunk itself proved to be unlocked. She climbed inside, fixing the drape so it would fall into place as she closed the lid. Out came her lock picks—being adept at her art, the thought of locking herself inside a confined space held no fear for her—but she had barely addressed the lock with her first pick when she heard the smugglers enter the hut. As silently as a cat landing on a bed of marshmallows in a dense fog bank, she set down her lock picks and slid out two of her daggers. The thought of impending discovery and attack only braced her for action! Nevertheless, as she sat with stillness and silence born of years of practice, she heard a sound that made her heart falter.

With no hand to turn it, the lock on the trunk had clicked shut.

“Do you hear something?” Deneth asked tentatively.

“No,” answered Mistra, “but my skin is crawling.” Both she and Deneth looked at Mosaia as if the composure they both perceived in the paladin made the admission of their own unease all the more difficult.

“What do you hear?” Mosaia asked, genuinely interested. In his opinion, a battle captain did not diminish his own worth by listening to the advice of those whose talents differed from his: often it was that ability to listen that gave him his victories! Besides, to him, Deneth and Mistra looked composed and in their element, while he himself was falling back on years of mundane experience in the face of the unknown and (probably) the supernatural.

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Deneth was buoyed by the confidence Mosaia was showing in him, but he shook his head. "I must be imagining it. It's like the sound a human crowd makes when it's milling around, and—tsk, this is *really* weird—I feel like I can hear the auctioneer. You know, "What am I bid for this fine specimen of Thalacian manhood: good body, low mileage, master bard, not-too-shaggy warrior, lots of potential as a breeder..." He would have gone on to lighten his own mood had not Mistra cut him off.

"Stop it, Deneth!" she snapped. She had paled, and her heart had begun to pound in her chest like the hammer of a weaponsmith possessed by demons. Her face was drawn as if in memory of some pain.

"Mistra?" Mosaia asked, compassion in his voice. He touched her arm lightly to bring her back from whatever reality the memory had thrust her into. "Princess? He meant it as a jest only. What pains you so?"

She shivered. "I was captured once on my travels and sold. Of all my strange adventures, that was the worst, even though it amounted to brief service with a kindly master." She grinned ruefully. "Imagine a member of the royal family of Caros being captured and sold as a slave!"

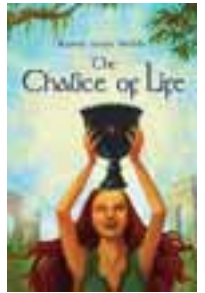
"Oh, come on," Deneth chided. "You could have escaped if you had wanted to."

"Yes, if it had been no more than a matter of saving my own skin." She took a moment to fight her way clear of the painful memory. When she met his gaze, there was challenge in her eyes. It was as if she were fighting the urge to ask him the question 50 out of every hundred Carotians might still ask: no matter how many lives depended on his in a crisis, what would be more important to a Thalacian than saving his own skin?

Deneth held her eyes, probed a little, saw how she was fighting the subtle conditioning of a lifetime for his sake, understood he had just trespassed with no more intention than Mosaia had had the day before. *Every man cursed with glibness, he said to himself, should have a woman like this to keep him in line!* He held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "When I *can* find the words around you," he said apologetically, "I seem to be constantly misstepping with them. I'm sorry."

It took a moment for her to register that he had just apologized, something 90 out of every hundred Carotians would not have believed possible and most of the remaining 10 would have refused to accept at face value. After that, she postured down and told him to think nothing of it.

"Mistra," Mosaia interjected in an attempt to soothe, "unless you are one of the hosts of Heaven, there will always be those who can have power over you in some way if they choose and if you let them. Capture is almost inevitable if you stray from home long enough or far enough." He ventured a comradely pat on her shoulder. Then, turning away, he held his torch aloft as if the subject were now settled and they would without question follow his lead in examining the place. Behind him, Mistra and Deneth stood regarding each other a moment longer. Mistra looked like she very much wanted to explain to the bard why he had hit a nerve, and Deneth looked like he understood and accepted that now was not the time and here was not the place. Neither was sure later which of them motivated the gesture, but their hands suddenly reached out and met in a quick, compan-



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ionable clasp, and they were all right again.

With a sound like a bank of generators being switched on, the place suddenly lit like noon on a cloudless day. The three companions blinked a moment, startled and momentarily dazed, before Mosaia resumed his investigation of what lay above them. "I commend your attention to the vault above," he said. He had hoped to engage the other two with an intellectual problem, as he had not completely fathomed the nature of their surroundings. He could see neither roof nor sky above them in the torchlight, and the area had a feeling of openness inconsistent with an enclosed underground space. Now, high enough above that they could just make it out, rose a ceiling of rough stone. They stood in a huge cavern.

"Yeah?" asked Deneth. "So?"

"'Twas quite a fall," Mosaia said patiently, "if fall it was, from the world outside."

Deneth, seeing his point, gave a low whistle. "And barely a scratch on any of us. I hadn't even thought of that. I had the sensation of falling, like down a long chute. You?"

"Uh-huh." Together the men fixed Mistra with their eyes, saying without words that this was her department and demanding an explanation.

Mistra frowned thoughtfully, her expression a silent salute to the worker of the spell. "And Sally wrote those pictographs off as so much foolishness and superstition. It must be a dimensional gate."

"A what?"

"Sort of the magical equivalent of a transporter, but a gate can take you all sorts of places a transporter couldn't, a little like our Portals. My guess would be that the enchantment covered the entire upper city and that the simple release of magical energy—*any* sort of magical energy—activated it. The ground *did* open, but the gate must have been constructed so we were just chuted through it as we started to fall, and so smoothly that we never made the connection. There may have even been a physical slide sort of thing with a second gate waiting at the bottom that kept us from breaking our necks as we came in from way up there." She looked up to the roof high above and gave a low whistle. "Quite a sophisticated spell, if I've interpreted it correctly—one I would think of a group being able to design and execute more effectively than an individual."

"The philosopher kings and queens of which Sally spoke?" suggested Mosaia.

"I was thinking of the group of monks who fashioned the chalice. And all this sophistication makes me wonder about you, Deneth."

"Ah," he said with gracious charm, "I've been wondering about myself for quite some time."

She grinned. "I mean your milling crowd and your auctioneer. A gate can manipulate the fabric of time as well as space."

She had been speaking with academic appreciation. As her final words sank in, however, she and the two men exchanged an uneasy glance, then looked as nonchalantly as possible to their weapons. They crept forward warily now. If there were some sort of time-sensitive gate here, they could

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end up in the Hamani past without warning—and there was nothing to guarantee they would be mistaken for Hamani rather than for members of the population from whom they drew their slaves. So far, the gate through which the questors had arrived here showed no sign of swinging in both directions. If they made a single misstep, might they end up in a frightening past from which there would be no escape?

With growing frequency now, one of them would start as he felt a phantom limb brush past or heard, on the very edge of perception, a voice cry out. They were moving toward the holding pen, the only other real feature of interest in the area. Although when they looked back, they could see that the entire underground had been illuminated (and that it was a very small area for having been the heart of the massive empire Sally had described), they still needed the torch to investigate the holding area. Initially, they found little of note: chains and rotted straw distributed around a room that formed a perfectly regular oblong.

Then the torchlight glinted on something hanging from a post at the far end of the corral. Simultaneously, Deneth pronounced that it was a key and Mistra jumped back, startled.

“I saw *people*,” she hissed. “Just for an instant, this place was filled with people!”

“That key,” Deneth said a bare beat behind her. “Why do I feel that key is something we’re going to need?”

Deneth and Mosaia shrugged off their own unease as no more than an effect of Mistra’s revelation, but as they advanced toward the key, they, too, began experiencing the same phenomenon. Soon, it was happening with alarming frequency. They slowed their progress so they were moving forward a bare step at a time, and still the time slips—they could conceptualize the events in no other way—bombed them. Each time the phenomenon occurred, it lasted a little longer and came closer on the heels of the one that had preceded it.

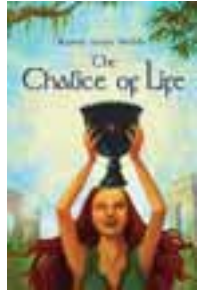
About half way across the pen, they drew to a halt by unspoken mutual consent.

“I still say we go for the key,” Deneth grouched.

“You do that,” snapped Mistra. “But it bloody well better open something, and that something better be pretty good.”

His stride became quite purposeful at that! “Come, Mistra,” Mosaia encouraged, beckoning. “He has naught to fear from any bound with these chains, but, if time *is* slipping, we had best see to the door and deal with the gaolers if and when they appear.” As if to emphasize his point, he slashed the air a few times with his sword. The blade crowed in anticipation of battle. Mistra trailed him, drawing her sword but focusing her concentration in preparation in case the need to whip off some magical pyrotechnics arose.

It did.



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Her spirits high, Sally now took the lead in their investigations; she bounced along like a frisky puppy escaping a stuffy house on the first warm day of spring. She stopped next to a sign that even T'Cru understood: a team of horses drawing a carriage, signifying a livery stables. The three of them stopped and regarded one another solemnly before Sally placed her hand on the latch. They braced themselves as if anticipating a blow. She reached out...

Guards lightly armored in breastplates and greaves strode up and down the stable yard. Some attended horses, currying and feeding them as if they were their own; others merely barked orders to stable hands to ready carriages for important visitors from outside the Hamani Empire. As they had been in the previous scene, Sally and her new friends were spectators, shades who observed, but to whose presence the participants were oblivious. They had no sense of motion, but they were drawn to one corner of the stable yard much as one would be drawn by looking down the business end of a high-power zoom lens. There, a captain of the guards was holding converse with a cloaked figure.

"It is essential that this missive reach the ambassador and *only* the ambassador," the cloaked figure hissed. Surreptitiously, he handed the captain a scroll bearing the seal of the Hamani Crown. "His majesty trusts to both your efficiency and your discretion in this matter."

"He can count on me!" replied the captain. "What's it all about, though?"

Silence from the cloaked figure.

"Come now, man. If the Priest-King can entrust me with so important a document, the least you can do is to entrust me with a little information. I want to know that, for my services, he's going to at least make a special effort to keep the plague from entering the city."

The cloaked man flashed him a strange grin; the way his brow was furrowing made his face look extremely strained. "What an odd request! You sound like you expect the supply of the Elixirs will fail before the tide of the plague can be stemmed."

"There's talk in the bunkhouses; there's talk in the taverns—too much talk for it to be rumors and no more, if you catch my drift. Do you want this delivered or not?"

"You would threaten a messenger of the King?"

"Oh, it's not a threat. It's just encouragement so I know what I'm getting myself involved in. I've a family to think of."

"All right, all right. This plague has every priest and every worker in the mines toiling without sleep. For the moment, there still seems to be enough of the Elixirs to treat everyone who's ill, but it's a near thing. I think that, when the priests of Qirith-Nar created the chalice and blessed the mines, they took no thought for whether our empire would expand in the days to come. I don't know that the magic that creates the Elixirs is faulty or that the mines are about to run out of gems, but the Elixirs don't just appear by themselves. The gems have to be mined and put in the chalice, and whatever fluids it is they mix them with to make the Elixirs have to be gotten from somewhere. The miners are mining. The King and the few

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priests he's taught the spell to are working hard, and the local Healers are distributing it as quick as may be. The plague, though, is striking people down almost faster than the Elixirs can be gotten to them. But don't worry! If the King has to make a decision about where the Elixirs go first, he's not going to let the military suffer!"

"That's all I wanted to hear." He considered the scroll. "If he's going to offer the Elixirs as an incentive to our neighbors to ally with us rather than guarding the secret as closely as the rulers since Queen Zargirt, I say more power to him! A ruler who can only keep with tradition when the times call for flexible thinking is of no worth to his people. I will see that this message gets through, sir. He'll get his treaty if I have anything to say about it..."

As the scene began to collapse around them, Sally again reached out an involuntary hand as if she could physically grab it and bring it back. Her desperation and loss gave way to delight as the scene actually seemed to respond! She looked to Alla and T'Cru to see if they shared her elation; rather than meeting her eyes, they were regarding the scene with puzzled frowns. Sally looked back at the soldier and the courier. It took a moment for her to register what was confusing her friends. Smitten with the poetry of the situation—the Priest-King was not only working overtime to make the Elixirs to save his people, he was going to offer them to his afflicted neighbors!—she missed what the more objective Alla and T'Cru saw immediately. So she looked more closely. When she did so, she saw that both the courier and the soldier had aged somewhat: the passage of many years might have caused the drawn looks and the grey hairs, but so could the passage of a very few years spent in grave worry or physical toil. When she took in the signs of wear on the courier's cloak and the soldier's armor, she was forced to opt for the latter. She let herself be drawn in again and saw that the substance of their conversation had also changed...

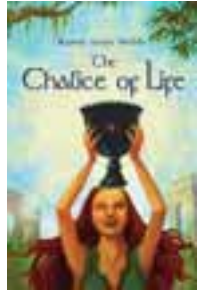
"It is essential that this missive reaches the Ambassador and only the Ambassador," the cloaked figure repeated. "His Majesty again trusts to both your efficiency and your discretion in the matter."

"He can count on me!" repeated the captain of the guard, though with less enthusiasm than he had shown previously. "What's it all about *this* time, though?"

Again, silence from the cloaked figure.

"Come now, man! If the Priest-King can entrust me again with so important a document, the least you can do is entrust me with a bit more information. I want to know that my family will be safe if the plague enters our neighborhood. I've only married off one daughter since the last time we went through this, and my sons are barely of age to enter the army."

"All right, all right. You know when the King was finally forced to deny the Elixirs to the Healers—when we reached the point a few months ago that there were more ill people than there were Elixirs to go around—he didn't mean to exclude the populace completely from reaping their benefit. Well, not the *worthwhile* populace, anyway. We can't be saving every peasant who comes up the pike after coming down with the malady—that would be wasteful of what the gods have so bountifully given our people. But there will always be some of that precious fluid available to those



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favored by the court; again, the King would be foolish to neglect the military and their families.”

“Don’t I know it!” the captain chuckled bleakly. “He’s relying on us to send soldiers to work in the mines now that the plague’s spread to the laborer’s quarter. At least the more people that die, the more gems there seem to be: there’s some comfort in that.”

“But there’s still just the one chalice. Now we can be glad that the Priest-King *has* guarded the secret of making the Elixirs as closely as Her Highness Zargirt ever did! The plague has just barely begun to affect the people whose favor he’s trying to court. If they knew that he was withholding the Elixirs from our own people because they’re in such short supply, or if they had a clue what it actually takes to make the blasted things, they’d come down on us in force while we were at our weakest. As long as he can maintain the pretense that he withholds it only from those out of favor with the court, we have a chance of forging an alliance. We don’t want our neighbors to become stronger than *we* are, but in this case currying the favor of their royal house would serve us better than making out and out war. As a soldier, you would know better than I, but with the plague, we’re in no shape to go out and conquer so much as a hive of bees just now. If our new allies use the Elixirs *judiciously*, as we have gained the wisdom to do, we have naught to fear from their classes that do the actual fighting—no deathless armies will march on us, no deathless priests will fling imprecations at our heads. A wise head for governance and diplomacy has our new Priest-King.”

“And I say more power to him! A ruler who can only keep with tradition when the times call for flexible thinking is of no worth to his people. Time enough for conquest when the Empire is back on its feet. I will see that this message gets through, sir. He’ll get his treaty if I have anything to say about it...”

WHOOSH! and the scene collapsed again. Sally stood blinking, her mouth hanging open; Alla and T’Cru were frowning as if they were not certain what to think.

“By every god and goddess of the Foretimes!” Sally finally gasped. “My noble and heroic tribesmen just produced a king who introduced a program of eugenics!”

“Perhaps,” Alla ventured, feeling her way, wanting to reassure the archaeologist that all was not lost, “perhaps the soldier and the courier voiced what they did not know to be true. If the Hamani King of this period chose to cement alliances in a time of plague by sharing the Elixirs freely, he was still performing a charitable act. His servants might only have *believed* he was withholding them from a portion of the Hamani people.”

T’Cru emitted a low growl. “A nobility that does such a thing to its own people is no longer deserving of the title. If the universal belief is that the Hamani civilization failed overnight and the only debate is over why and how, I think you may still have the right of it. Certainly if they suffered divine retribution of some sort, there would be no better time for the retribution to be visited than if the King, rather than healing his own when this plague struck, hoarded the Elixirs for the noble classes and used them

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to woo allies. I think assuming the Priest-King entered into a program of eugenics for his own gain might be casting him in too unfavorable a light—unless, in fact, the Empire *did* end here.” There was a question in his voice.

“No, it went on for several hundred more years,” Sally assured him, but she seemed to take no pleasure in the knowledge. “We mark the end of the Early Empire period with a natural catastrophe that most agree was a pestilence of some sort. It didn’t kill off *everyone*, but the census records indicate a severe drop in the population.” She sighed. “And then they seem to have made a complete recovery.”

“This dismays you?”

“A little. I think the one flaw in my thinking about the nature of Hamani governance has always been *how* they recovered.”

“If they lived in harmony with their neighbors,” reasoned Alla, “mightn’t the recovery have just been the natural result of getting the plague under control?”

“Yes, but—well, I was thinking that, if the internal labor force died off, it had to be replaced, and that the only place for the Hamani to go for replacements was outside their own empire. If they were sealing an alliance with the Elixirs, a logical thing for them to be trading for would have been a labor force.”

“Slaves?”

“Or very, very indentured servants. It paints an ugly picture of a people I’ve always wanted to see as noble.”

“And an even worse one if this Priest-King or any of his successors *chose* to limit the quantity of Elixirs produced to keep their trade value high,” said T’Cru. “I think I’ve heard the humans call this the Golden Rule.”

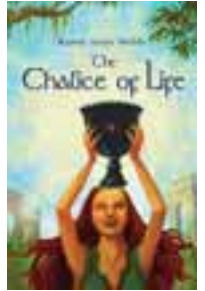
“He who has the gold makes the rules?” Sally asked grimly.

“But—but—” Alla sputtered a little, fully ready to jump in to defend Sally’s original thesis now that she saw the young woman’s confidence in it beginning to erode. She shook her head. “The Erebiters, Torreb’s race, are a race of healers. They are unlike my folk, yet I cannot conceive of the mightiest of them thinking to withhold the gift of his healing so it gave him political advantage. I hope *some* time elapsed between the time of Queen Zargirt and the time of a ruler that would do such a thing to his own people! I hope even more that what we just witnessed is as I said—two men not particularly high in the councils of their lord gossiping.”

Sally rubbed her brow in a spot where a headache was threatening to strike. “It’s *not* that much later than the first scene. In fact, we’re still within the period I had in mind when I said I’d hop in the time machine with no questions asked.”

“Would your faith in our human companions be shattered else,” T’Cru asked the *Aranyaka* gently, “to find that human civilizations are so apt to rapid degradation? I think our Carotian friends represent human civilization at its zenith, but for every zenith there is a nadir.”

Sally took Alla’s hand. “I know you’re trying to keep my spirits up, and I thank you. Hearing and seeing a vision that so easily cast my tribesmen in an unfavorable light was too much of a shock after seeing those first two scenes unfold! But I’ve recovered now. I can see that the two men we



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overheard might easily have misinterpreted the interests of their King. For that matter, if the Priest-King was faced with a situation where the need for the Elixirs outstripped his ability to produce them, it doesn't necessarily follow that he was evil if he had to control their distribution. I mean, if that distribution included giving them to a people who might otherwise take advantage of the weakness in the Empire to overrun it, that's just good politics. Right? Maybe if we push on, we'll find a scene that supports my thesis or at least suggests that, if this *did* represent a moral lapse, the Empire underwent an unequivocal recovery. Things run in cycles, don't they?" She was not a religious woman, so she did not pray. But she did, in defiance of her words, stoke the tiny spark of hope that had arisen in her heart, the hope that Hamani heroes would still arise from the murk of ethical decline.

"Let's at least get away from these human places of business for a few minutes," Alla suggested, as if the taint of greed went with structures built with human hands. "What's that up ahead?"

T'Cru put his nose to what little breeze there was in the undercity. "I smell water—flowing water. Can it be a river?"

—

The instant Deneth removed the key from its hook, the shadows solidified. Instead of merely slipping, time had just fallen flat on its face! He had no time to consider how he might best get it back on its feet, for the three of them were set upon at once as armed intruders. He saw it all with alarming clarity from the shadowy corner from which he had retrieved the key. Of the dozen or so "gaolers" gathered in the slave pen, one went to raise the alarm; two turned to engage him, although not until he had gotten close enough to score on both. All the rest ganged up on Mistra and Mosaia. As he engaged his first serious opponent, another dozen came streaming through the door. A dozen was far more than he would have anticipated, considering how securely the slaves were shackled, and they were equipped with far better weapons. It defied logic, but Mistra drew the bulk of them while Mosaia only drew enough to keep him occupied; those who engaged the paladin seemed mainly to be trying to drive a breach between him and Mistra. Then he saw—they were striking at Mistra chiefly to subdue her, and doing so with great finesse. Perhaps, he thought grimly, they had their quota of men-at-arms in the market today but were short on women of any description.

He launched himself into the fray but could not get near her. For every step he gained forward, the cluster of warriors around her had receded two: even as they worked to tire her, they were herding her toward the block. Why, he wondered, was she not blasting them to little pieces with a spell of some sort? He saw *that* a beat too late as well. It took a certain amount of concentration for even a skilled Carotian to mold the Ether, and the warriors around Mistra were allowing her no respite whatsoever. The minute she met one blade, its bearer gave way and danced nimbly beyond her reach. At the same time, another blade came whizzing toward her from

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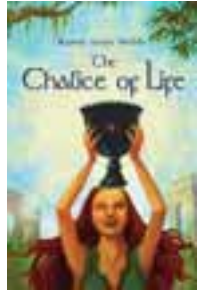
another direction, so she was forced to turn as well as block, all on top of having been thrown off her rhythm by the sudden lapse of resistance as she parried. A few of the blows were landing, albeit very lightly, so she could not afford simply to stand her ground on the assumption that the strikes were no more than feints. These people knew their business—had, in fact, developed it into a cruel art.

Seeing that no harm would come to her, while Mosaia was truly in peril of his life, Deneth dived in to help the paladin. A moment's pity smote his heart as three more warriors attacked—the skirmish was ranging this way and that about the slave pens with no regard for what—or who—it might be running over. The slaves, chained as they were, were periodically being trampled, tripped over, or skewered as shots missed their targets and went wide. He had to put down the feeling in favor of bringing his skills to bear to save his own life and his friend's. He fought his way to the spot where Mosaia was giving battle to his foes, then set his back to the paladin's.

Mosaia had previously been able to jump clear when he felled an opponent; now, fighting back-to-back, the two of them had to be content to let the bodies pile up around them. And pile up they did! When ten corpses lay around them, the few remaining soldiers fled. Deneth did not stop to debate with Mosaia the wisdom of dashing wildly out of the building when the soldiers might simply have gone for reinforcements. He did not stop to think that a trap might be waiting for them outside, or that bowmen might have their weapons trained on the door. The battle rage had come on him. He could do no more than follow where his heart led him, and it led to Mistra's side.

Taking only the precaution to eject himself from the door to the pens in a rolling somersault, Deneth propelled himself into the square. He met no immediate resistance and so was able to see what had become of Mistra. It did nothing to still his rage. She had been disarmed and dragged to the block. Her captors had put up their weapons; she could have freed herself easily enough if they had left her alone for the barest fraction of an instant, but they seemed intent on poking and prodding and seeing if she had some value beyond the obvious ones of womanhood and skill with weapons. With both the danger and the battle fury upon him, he was still forced to laugh as one man who went so far as to check out her contours got her knee in his crotch for the liberty. She next applied the toe of her boot to his kneecap, then raked his shin and stomped on his foot. A well-placed snap kick toppled him into the three men behind him. He decided at that moment that the stereotype of Carotians as the masters of all things cerebral (and of the Thalacians as the only true warriors in the system) was seriously twisted.

"Now, Mistra!" he whispered, seeing her opening. He stormed forward. At the same moment, he heard a concerted battle cry from his right side and knew that Mosaia—and his sword—had been waiting for the same opening. In the commotion that followed, Deneth felt the surge of power. Mistra pulled free of her shackles, as did all of the others secured to the block: she must have simply willed the silly things open. Her sword



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went zipping by his head as she called it to her hand from the pile where the guards had thrown it. He wondered later if she had ordered it to avoid him and Mosaia specifically, for in its trip across the square, it seemed to be impacting everything else in its path. When it encountered one of the customers, it merely gave him a good swat. When, however, it “noticed” a knot of soldiers, it would run headlong into it and inflict as many wounds as possible before moving on. There must have been an automatic component to the recall spell, for Mistra was not concentrating on the blade as it careened toward her. In fact, she had incapacitated two of the guards in hand-to-hand combat before her sword plunked itself into her open palm. The instant she had the sword securely in her grasp, Deneth was obliged to force himself to occupy the smallest space he could: the entire pile of confiscated weapons took to the air, sailing toward the block and the waiting hands of the prisoners Mistra had just freed. The guards, who had sheathed their weapons in the belief that their chained captives posed no threat, for a moment had the advantage only of numbers.

Much as he would have been happy to let the rage dissipate while he watched Mistra decimate the entire guard single-handed, he knew it was time to come to her aid. He had seen the look that now came to the faces of the guards on other faces at other times: capture was no longer in their minds, but killing and maiming were. They had fixed on Mistra as the most dangerous of the people here and had made her the primary target of their mayhem. His eyes met hers as she set her back to the block, but there was no particular plea in them. She gave him a grin and a wink even as the soldiers formed a semicircle around her and prepared to close in. Then the air of concentration returned: she, too, seemed to know that the soldiers would kill her if they could. *And what happens to us if we die here?* he wondered idly. He felt the surge of energy come again. The ring of guards jumped and backed as if they had been hit by a jolt of electrical energy.

It was the opening Deneth needed. This time, there was neither distraction nor threat to life and limb from an unexpected quarter. With Mosaia at his side, he came charging through the press of guards, prisoners, and fleeing customers and broke through the ring. The two of them flanked Mistra till she could pull away from the block and get her back to theirs. In this position, standing like a human triangle, they were able to forge a slow retreat. Some of the guards were still dazed from the jolt of magical energy; others, considering the bodies that now littered the square, seemed wary of facing the three of them at once, especially when there were poorly nourished, unarmored slaves they could subdue. Still, about a score of guards pressed forward in an attempt to surround them and cut off their retreat. Luckily, time had slipped to a point when energy weapons had not yet been developed, and all they faced were blades and clubs. Those who had concluded that Mistra had freed the slaves and those who had faced Deneth or Mosaia and lived to tell the tale were reluctant to close in too tightly. Few dared advance, and when enough of those had lost limbs, the rest backed off, content only to see that the trio left the square without doing any more damage.

Five minutes after they had set out from the block, the three

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companions gained the entrance to the square in safety. Deneth let the tension leave his body then and felt Mosaia do the same. Mistra, though, looked as if she were considering tossing off a spell just on general principles, and the Retributor was chanting battle cries and begging to go back into the fray—but suddenly time righted itself and the entire scene vanished. Leaning over to rest her hands on her knees and catch her breath, Mistra swore.

“Disappointed?” asked Deneth.

“Warriors have one sort of battle rage; sorceresses have another,” she replied with a wan smile. “One good display of pyrotechnics would have done a lot to use up this excess adrenaline.” She blew a long breath out through her mouth. “Thanks, fellas.”

“My pleasure,” replied Deneth. He swung the key, knowing his grin was pure self-satisfaction.

“More than a gate, I guess,” Mosaia ventured, looking as bemused as he was winded. “More like a—what?—a time trap?” He looked to Mistra for confirmation and saw that she could not better his description. “At least it makes me feel the key must be worth something, that it was guarded so.”

“Then let us go in search of more things of value,” enthused the Retributor, “that we may engage these foul fiends again! I feel alive again! I feel whole! To be wielded by such an arm, to be the vessel through which the justice of my lord Ereb flows, to be freeeeee...!” It prattled on as the three humans got their bearings and assessed what to do.

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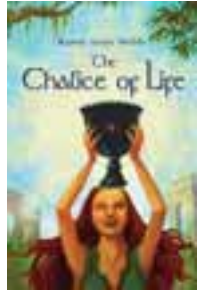
The street that Sally, Alla, and T’Cru were following ended in a river—not great, but one too wide for any of them to ford unaided. The current was lazy, the water dark. A small quay extended out some way; a single boat was anchored there—it was not about to sink, but it had definitely seen better days. The other bank was not visible beyond the mists that rose from the water.

Drawn to investigate this time by a force that impelled her forward, Sally did not confer with her companions about marching out onto the quay and boarding the small vessel. She felt the boat rock slightly as Alla joined her; when she looked back, T’Cru had taken up his position on the quay to guard their backs. She thought his hackles had risen and wondered briefly if even so majestic a feline as he possessed the instinctual fear of water so many of his smaller kin did.

She looked to Alla for a nod, then reached for the door of the cabin...

They were shades again, silent witnesses to a scene taking place inside the boat’s cabin. The craft was again water worthy. The cabin itself was decorated with a variety of opulent furnishings: everywhere they looked, they saw rich tapestries, low divans covered with plush fabrics, small tables carved intricately of the finest woods, and trinkets crafted of gold and fine gems. More than anything, this seemed to Sally the inside of a pleasure craft, a plaything for the idle rich.

The door opened, and two figures entered. Both were cloaked and



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hooded; as they cast their cloaks aside, Sally and Alla could see that both were women, both in their very well-kept middle years. One was clad in the brief Hamani garb. The other was swathed in colorful fabric that concealed much less than one would have thought at first glance. Colors so opaque as to look black revealed a surprising quantity of skin when backlit; small gaps opened in the cloth as she moved so her raiment from time to time revealed a suggestive expanse of bosom or thigh. Alla surprised a pang of relief at the fact that Torreb was not here to witness the display!

“You said you had a solution for my husband’s difficulty with the leader of the Qirith-Nar,” said the woman swathed in color.

“I do,” replied the other, “and it is as poetic a solution as ever a minstrel could devise.” She brought out a small vessel inscribed with a hand within a heart; this one marbled so all the colors mingled on a black ground.

The first woman made a disparaging sound. “That is but a vessel such as your folk use for the Elixirs of Life, is it not? In fact, is not the design of the vessel one of recent origin, one that signifies all five Elixirs have been mixed together to form a tonic? Is your solution, then, that my husband should woo this pompous ass by promising him eternal health?”

“Not at all, your ladyship. You see, of even more recent origin is the discovery that, when all the Elixirs are mixed, the proper enchantments can make of the blend yet another Elixir—one that, mixed with the subject’s food, will kill without detection...”

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Sally came to herself gasping in shocked disbelief. Beside her, Alla had paled. “Oh, my gods in heaven!” Sally cried. She clutched the railing for support as she fought down a wave of nausea.

“Thank the Mother that Torreb wasn’t here to hear that,” Alla choked out.

“They became assassins! That beautiful chalice invested with the secret of life, and they used it to kill! Who *have* I been studying all these years? *What* have I been studying? I’ve dedicated my entire professional life to unmasking the one clue that would show how they were misunderstood and not the cruel, heartless monsters history has made them out. How could I have been so deluded after studying all the evidence? Oh, but even with all the evidence, I never had a clue it would end like this!” And she buried her face in her hands. She had sobbed for only a moment before the fit passed, but in that time, Alla had taken her in her arms and gently guided her back to the quay. She was thankful—it was easier to breathe here, as if the boat itself represented some reek of pollution, and here on the quay she had risen above the stench.

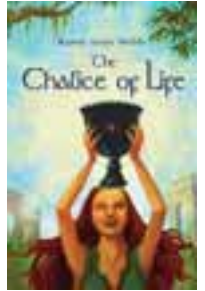
“There must be more to the story,” T’Cru reasoned once Alla had clarified for him the reason for Sally’s outburst. He put a velvety paw on Sally’s knee as she sat on the quay with her head in her hands. “There is often goodness in the common people of a culture, even if their rulers have gone mad with passion and power. When we are reunited with our comrades, you must ask Deneth to tell you about his home.”

The archaeologist emitted a bleak laugh. “The more visions we have that subvert my ideas, the more you and Alla try to buoy my spirits!”

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“Our answers may only lie in *further* visions,” said Alla. “Can you face it, dear Sally?”

She nodded in what she hoped they interpreted as a show of bravery. “I think I must. Come on. There was one more building that seemed to be shifting in and out of phase.”



Habie had done her best to sink into the bottom of the trunk, but as it turned out, she needn't have worried. The lock, though it had imprisoned her, foiled her pursuers. She heard them try to open it with daggers and lock picks, and then bash on the lid with something heavy, but her refuge proved inviolable.

“Nar,” she heard Jack say. “She couldn't have gotten in here and locked it up that tight that quick and her inside and this drape on top and all. Rotten little thief. Must have gone off in another direction.” He swore. “What a pesthole this is. Look at the rat tracks in the dust. C'mon, lads.”

She exhaled when she heard them go, not realizing till that moment that she had been holding her breath. Besides the threat that they might somehow breach the chest, there had remained the possibility that they might torch the cottage or throw the chest into a bottomless pit out of spite, just in case she *had* been inside. She probably would have if they had caused her the trouble she and her friends had caused them.

Whistling a little tune, she whipped out her own set of lock picks and set to work. As she shifted her weight for a better shot at the keyhole, she bumped into something in the trunk. Her whistling faltered but did not stop. Thinking the trunk had seemed empty when she had curled up inside it, she groped for the object and picked it up.

“Now, what fascinating and wonderful thing could be hidden in a trunk in a dilapidated, rat-infested pesthole?” she wondered aloud. It was not the strident remark it would have been from someone else: Habie had long ago developed the ability to see possibilities in the oddest finds, as whatever she found was apt to be better than what she had, which was usually nothing. Her nimble fingers quickly defined the contours of a vessel of some sort, stone by the feel of it, but a stone that was at once smooth and cool to the touch. There were smooth bulges set in a line that encircled it. “Gems, I wonder? Huh—draffing paste, as like as not. If they *had* paste back then.”

As she sat fingering the vessel and trying to gauge its market value, the lock clicked again. She froze. She listened. Hearing nothing, she breathed once more and reached a tentative hand up. The lid yielded to gentle pressure. Light poured in, and she could see that what she held was a chalice. It was made of a glassy black stone like finely worked and polished obsidian. Five sockets girdled it. Four contained gemstones: there were a sapphire, an emerald, a moonstone, and a diamond. A quick look told Habie all she needed to know about their quality: cashing in any one of them would allow her to purchase the entire Lemurian quarter and power it for a year!

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“Lethal!” her mouth enthused even as her brain wondered “Light?” The place had been completely dark when she had entered, and the pirates had sounded like they were stumbling around in shadow. She stood. Her jaw dropped as she observed not a rat-infested pesthole, but a neat cottage, richly appointed. Oil lamps burned here and there. Across the room from her sat a wood stove; beside it, a little round table with two chairs made up a small dining area. Off to one side lay a dresser and bed. Little knickknacks, many of them gold, were placed here and there on tables or on shelves lining the walls. As she stepped from the trunk and reached for the cloth that had been draping it, she found not a hank of rotting cloth but a beautiful piece of tapestry worked in threads of silver and gold.

“OK,” she murmured in a long, drawn-out breath. Although no one was watching her, she did her best to behave as if things like this happened to her every day. She walked around putting a hand to nearly every object in the room; she had made a complete circuit of the place before it struck her that everything was comfortably within reach. “I don’t guess they have Lemurians anyplace else,” she conjectured. “A dwarf, maybe? A gravedigger? Looks like it paid well, whatever.” She put aside the desire that was rising in her heart—a heart that had been forced to avarice for survival’s sake for far too long—in favor of curiosity about a map on the wall above the trunk. It detailed a settlement in the shape of a cross. It was quite detailed—each building was sketched in and labeled—but the edges were layered with a thick silvery banding that changed colors as she moved. The lettering that had initially looked like gibberish reformed itself as she watched into calligraphed Galactic Common. She frowned as she read off from the extreme edges of the map “Temple,” “Slave Market,” “Graveyard,” and “Land’s End Inn.”

A warm glow suffused her as she connected the legend “Land’s End Inn” with the one hint the dragon had been able to give them. She decided she must celebrate by pocketing one of the little golden knickknacks. “Just something small,” she reminded herself. “After all, I’m working for a goddess now and not starving in the streets of Caros City. And the caretaker or gravedigger or whatever he is is obviously loaded, *if* he’s even still alive.” She considered, narrowed her choices, and then settled on a cunningly worked incense burner.

The instant she closed her hand around it, she was plunged back into darkness. “Oops.” She said it quietly, aware she had broken some unwritten ground rule when the chalice remained solid while the incense burner turned to mist in her fingers. “Time to beat it, Habie,” she added. She opened the door and slipped out, but not before noticing that the place truly was the rat-infested pesthole Jack had described. “Weird,” was her final word on the subject before she made for the inn, but she said it with little vehemence.

At the dockside stood an attractive building that, by the shape and set of its colorful bottle glass windows and general layout, was an inn. A sign

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over the door showed a cliff overhanging a stormy sea. Runes unfamiliar to the questors spelled out the name of the place.

"I can read this," Sally announced in wonder. "'The end of...' um... Ah! 'Land's End!'"

Alla and T'Cru perked up. "That's what the dragon said," said T'Cru.

Not truly expecting another vision, Sally reached for the door handle...

Immediately, the inn reached out to engulf them. The place came alive with light and activity. The general clientele seemed to be drawn from the common folk, but in one corner, a figure who could only have been the Priest-King was regaling his noble companions with tales of his most recent campaign to quell rebellion in one of the empire's outlying provinces. The common folk, the barmaids and the proprietor seemed to take the presence of the nobility in stride, as if this slumming were an everyday occurrence. The atmosphere was one of complete conviviality.

So it came as a violent contrast when the door crashed open and a priest in vermillion robes stormed in accompanied by a number of underlings garbed in white. Each of them wore a medallion bearing the symbol of the hand-within-the-heart. "You!" their chief thundered at the Priest-King from across the room. He was a dark man with thick brows and a thicker beard; his eyes burned like smoldering coals. All around, tankards and goblets crashed to the floor and mouths hung open—a few more timid souls even dived for cover—but the Priest-King merely gave the newcomer priest the regard he would have accorded an insect under a dissecting microscope.

"You!" the priest repeated as he strode across the room with purpose that none dared hinder. "Assassin!"

The nobles looked defiant; the Priest-King himself looked only faintly amused. "If you have a quarrel with me, Brother Gelis, kindly apply to my steward to have it voiced in court—or in private, if you wish, but do not trouble me in my brief hours of relaxation."

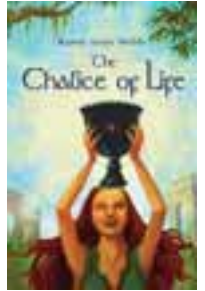
"I am *Father* Gelis now, thanks to you and your minions. Shall I explain to these good revelers gathered here how you took the Chalice of Life—the chalice *we* created for you—and perverted its use so the substance of the Elixirs became a deadly poison?" There were some rumblings at this bit of news, but it prompted no one to act.

"Your order created the Chalice of Life for my people that we might enjoy unencumbered health, my good man. It occurred to me that the good will of your own king was as life to my people, since we need it to continue with our war. He holds, after all, the Passes of Ya Noshon. And his good will was dependent upon our helping him to deal with your predecessor. Conversely, his ill will could have had distinctly *unhealthy* repercussions for my folk. I am sincerely sorry if you were discommoded in any way." He snorted a derisive laugh. "You ought to be thanking me, really, if you got a promotion out of it all."

"And that is all you have to say upon the matter?"

"Yes." This in the tone of a genius being extremely patient with a moronic child.

"Will you deliver into our hands the remainder of this poison that



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is anathema so that we may destroy it, and will you swear never to create it again?"

He burst out laughing, as did his entire party. "You can't be serious! It took me and my best house priests months to hit on the combination of spells that would work. That is far too much work to waste, and the poison is entirely too useful a substance to be disposed of so thoughtlessly."

His voice sank to a whisper. "You do not fear the ill-will of the Priests of Qirith-Nar?"

More chortles. "My good father, in the time the chalice was created, *you* needed *us* to defend you, and we were hardly a power to be feared at the time. Your order knows nothing beyond healing and the tending of plants. Since I have the chalice and the wherewithal to make the Elixirs, I need no healers, and I have gardeners in plenty."

Gelis' voice was still a whisper, but the room had now grown so quiet that the whisper had the impact of a thunderclap. "Then I curse you," he intoned. "You, who take the gift of life and bring from it death, you who take sweetness and bring from it depravity, you who take a boon freely given and peddle it for your own advantage while your subjects die in the streets. Too long have the Brothers of Qirith-Nar sat idly by while the gift of our hands and hearts was used for baser and baser purposes. Still, till now it has been used to heal. To turn its substance to poison is an abomination. What we gave before freely, we now take back—"

"It is hidden where you can never come to it!" the Priest-King snapped, his face suddenly a mask of fury. "You insolent puppy! Fool of a priest! *I* rule here, and I say—"

"Then it will be hidden where none will *ever* come to it."

"Guards! Seize him!"

"Priest-King of no merit, your doom is come upon you, and you have none to blame save your own self." Behind him, his fellow monks were forming a large circle. They were the only ones in the place moving; the patrons had frozen, and the guards' attempt to seize the priest was conspicuous in its absence. "Your empire will fail, your great city will fall into disrepair and ruin, your land will refuse to bear the weight of your hated feet till it spits you up and swallows you whole." Up came a score of symbols of the hand-within-the-heart. A low drone came from the throats of the circle of monks. "The chalice and everything needed to make the Elixir of Life will be lost to the sight of men, never to find the light of day again till that one party comes who is as high of mind and heart as the chalice deserves, and who want from it no gain save the charitable salvation of lives." He stepped back so he took the one space remaining in the circle, completing it. Power rose and crackled around him and his fellow monks like electricity. The drone rose in pitch and volume till those who heard it could barely endure the sound. At the last moment before eardrums would have begun bursting all over the room, Gelis raised his hands over his head and brought them sharply down. There was a roar like the sea surging through a broken dike...

This time, Sally perceived that she was gasping in unison with her two companions. "By the Lady herself!" T'Cru was muttering. "Have we just

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seen how this society ended?”

Alla nodded mutely, but Sally was suddenly galvanized into action. “We must get into this inn somehow.”

“Please, Sally,” said Alla. “I’ve had enough visions for now.”

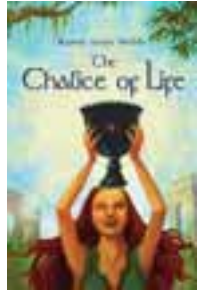
“It’s shown us what it’s going to show us,” Sally asserted. “Listen, you two. You said your dragon said that ‘land’s end’ was where we’d find the mine. And here’s the Land’s End Inn. If the empire ended here, then here is where we must begin.”

T’Cru flashed her a feline grin. “For one who thinks of magic as silly, you have a remarkable understanding of its internal logic.”

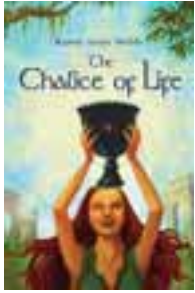
“Me? No! It’s only common sense. You two back away if you want. I’m going to try the handle again.” She laid her hand on the doorknob.

No vision appeared to engulf them this time: that was the good part. The bad part was that the door was securely locked. Sally, on the assumption that it was merely stuck, jostled it a number of times. When she put her shoulder to it the first time—without success—Alla and T’Cru came over to see if they could help. But try as they might with their combined strengths, they could not budge it. Alla went so far as to shift to the shape of a fruit fly to see if she could probe the keyhole, but some force resisted her passing. The door itself was so well-constructed that there was no crevice or crack that could offer her admittance, even in so minuscule a form.

“I suppose Mistra could spell this open,” T’Cru panted after one last attempt at breaking the door down by brute force. “But in the aftermath of that last trick, she may be reluctant to use her magic. We need Deneth or Habadiah.”



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CHAPTER 8



The Puzzle Complete

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“There is a time for thought and a time for action, and this isn’t it.”

—Tuhl, placidly, meditating

“There’s a time for thought and a time for action, and this isn’t it!!!”

—Oenech, loudly, panicking

Torreb found himself staring at an enormous disembodied face, marginally human (or vaguely demonic) in appearance. It stared in his direction but did not sight on him. He opened his mouth to speak several times but each time thought better of it. He was quite a novice at commanding otherworldly creatures, although he had been trained in the requisite skills. He had succeeded in establishing rapport with a single friendly entity at home. She acted as his intermediary when he attempted to divine or seek advice from Ereb directly. He doubted, however, whether the rapport, the creature, or the relationship would do him any good in this situation.

In the end, the creature saved him the trouble of opening the conversation. “I am Nevi,” it boomed without warning, “Oracle of the Hamani. Approach and ask what you will.”

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“Oh!” he exclaimed. His mind went into overdrive as he tried to formulate a sensible response to this. “I wonder if I get as many questions as I want,” he said to himself, and “What if I don’t?” and “Better make the first one count,” followed by this discourse: “Let’s see. Where am I? That would be useful. And where are the others—so would that. Better yet, where’s the gem mine and how exactly do we use the gems to heal the dragons?” He sighed. “Well, I suppose honesty never hurts when dealing with an oracle. If I phrase an isolated question improperly, or just the least deceptively or incompletely, who knows how it will answer? It might help me achieve our objective by casting me back in time to the day when the chalice was created!”

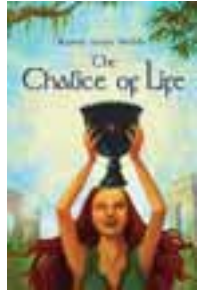
He squared his shoulders and intoned in his best clerical manner. “Oh, great Nevi! I am a stranger in your land. My friends and I must pass a mystical Portal to an unknown realm. Before that Portal lies an ill dragon of goodly kind, whom we must heal ere we can pass. My companions and I were separated when we fell by magic from the upper world. We must pass this Portal together and, I reckon, work together to heal the dragon and his kind. The dragon told us that what would heal him would be gems from a mine we would find at ‘land’s end.’ Can you give me advice that will help me achieve my goal?”

The oracle hissed before it spoke, and Torreb wondered if he had gone a little overboard in setting the matter clearly before it. “Deep questions you pose,” it said in a voice that suggested, instead, that this was the best problem anyone had posed it in the last millennium. It paused, reminding Torreb of nothing as much as a great computer uploading information to its display. The impression was strengthened by the way the oracle paused before each sentence as if the information were becoming more complex and taking longer to transfer. “Bound up they are with the enchantment of this place and the life of the very stones. Easy is it to reunite you with your friends: then your heart and wits must guide you. The entrance to the mine is removed from where the gems may be found, for good reason, for the mine is the place where humours of the flesh mingle with the fabric of the earth itself. Much power exists in that place!”

The longest pause yet came, so that Torreb wondered if he needed to pose a second question, or if the oracle had given up as much of its information as it was going to. Finally, it went on unprompted, and its voice was weary and distant. “There is a chalice, lost from this temple in the waning days of the priest-kings and crucial to your quest. In it are set one of each sort of gem obtainable from the mines. Into it goes the proper stone and the humour sympathetic to it. Beware that you combine them properly! The fluid useful to the ill creature is that made from the one out of balance in his own body.”

“But how—?”

“Enough!” Nevi snapped. It drooped a little and sighed heavily. “Find the chalice, and you will achieve your goal. I have stayed almost to the limit of my strength. Here is one more help, then I must go.” A gap in space opened between them. “This will lead you to your friends. Go swiftly and to good fortune!”



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“You are wise and just, O Nevi Oracle. May none trouble you who would put your knowledge to perverse use, and may I unravel all you have said!” He stepped through the gate and into a room dark except for the light that poured in through the colorful bottle glass windows.

The Retributor chattered on and on as they stood at the edge of the square surveying the now deserted slave market and puzzling over the spells (or, in Mosaia’s case, the deviousness of the mind) that had set up this trap, and for what purpose. “Oh, that was *such* fun!” the sword yammered, its courtly manner forgotten in the excitement of the moment. “The evil men we stood against! The exhilaration of fighting the abomination of slavery! Let’s go back! Maybe they’ll reappear if we go back!”

“I don’t think so,” was Mistra’s judgment. Her voice had taken on an abstracted quality.

“Uh-oh, Mistra’s taken a little trip out into the Ether,” said Deneth. And, indeed, she wore an expression similar to the one he had noticed in Alla from time to time, one that said she was looking through an unseen window into a reality in which the rest of them could not share.

Still looking like she was a bit Elsewhere, Mistra went on, “It was a time slip meant to deter us from leaving here with something—probably the key—to spook us into giving it up, or to test our worth or our commitment once we’d gotten our hands on it. At least, that’s how I read it. It went from mere sinister suggestion to flesh and blood reality when Deneth removed the key. I don’t think the phenomenon will recur now that we’ve escaped with it.” She touched an absent hand to one thigh, where the pain of a wound was asserting itself now that they were out of danger.

“You are hurt, lady,” Mosaia said with a shock. He had seen very few legs this shapely, and none of them had been streaming blood! “Indeed, you were the hardest beset of the three of us, for they sought to capture you unharmed initially, while Deneth and I were merely kept busy. I have some skill as a healer by virtue of my vows. Pray let me see to it.”

“Thank you. If you could see to my stamina, I would be even happier. I thought I was in better shape than that.”

“You are in excellent shape, though my standards may be faulty.” He grinned as he helped her to sit against a nearby wall and set to work. “I do not have to tell you I have never seen a woman wield a blade.”

“I mean I think I tired very easily. As you said, they *were* only trying to subdue me at the beginning.”

“You didn’t see it from my perspective,” said Deneth, looping the key’s chain around his neck. “Those fellows were professionals. They were *working* to tire you, worrying you like a pack of hungry raptors. If you want to blame someone, blame me. I should have been ready to jump into a fight the minute I had the key off its hook. It took me seconds too long to jump into it, *and* I had the element of surprise, which was useless to me once I’d let the moment slip. I’m sorry you were injured.”

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"I've certainly been damaged worse than this," she laughed, but she looked at him sidelong, as if she were not sure if he was berating himself on her account or because he really thought he deserved it.

"Then whoever fixed you up did a remarkable job—at least, if it was an injury on an exposed thigh. I mean, from where I'm standing, what I'm looking at is practically perfect." He flashed a charming smile, disregarding the glare Mosaia shot him. "That's only my opinion, of course. What do you think, Mosaia? I mean, you're more of a professional than I am when it comes to this sort of thing."

"I have little experience of women's limbs," the paladin replied, unruffled. "In my part of Falidia, women generally cover themselves from neck to wrist to ankle. Your pardon, Mistra, but women of my acquaintance wear undergarments that cover more than what your folk don as everyday street wear."

"Yet you've not reddened a bit, or missed a beat at all, in groping Mistra's thigh pursuant to healing her wound," Deneth observed amiably.

"A paladin does not *grobe* his patients, Deneth," Mosaia said pointedly. "He sees only the flesh to be healed and does not relate it to any other use to which it might be put were he to observe it in another context."

"Then he is—or you are—made of sterner stuff than I!" he chortled.

"Hedonist!" snorted the sword. "Libertine! How like a knave to take on so in front of such a noble lady!"

"You haven't heard the press the Thalacians get from the rest of the Union about the aftermath of the battle rage," Mistra replied, "especially if it is incompletely spent in melee. I would say Deneth is responding with remarkable restraint."

"What she's referring to," Deneth began, "is—"

"Rutting like crazed lemmings in heat?" Mosaia said drily. "Yes, I'm familiar with that vein of humor. Paladins bear the brunt of many jokes about it on my home world. For example, how many paladins in the aftermath of the battle rage does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

Mistra and Deneth exchanged a glance that said, "Falidians have a sense of humor?"

"I'll bite," said Deneth. "How many?"

"No one knows. The last one who tried electrocuted himself."

"Huh?"

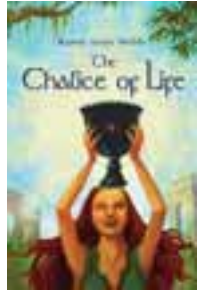
Mistra grinned a silly little grin. "I think the implication is that the last paladin to try did so while he was taking a long, cold shower."

"Exactly," said Mosaia. "Surely your folk have examples of humor that require explanation for any not familiar with your cultural norms."

"Oh, sure," said Deneth. "Although I'm going to think real hard before I tell any more that suggest the Carotians only indulge once every eight years as a concomitant of the *tal-yosha*, or that they deny the carnal in favor of the cerebral and spiritual so much they can't possibly enjoy what they're doing even then."

"And I," said Mistra, "will think long and hard before I tell any more that suggest my folk are more enlightened than Deneth's."

"We have light bulb jokes, too," Deneth said to Mosaia. "Suffice it to



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say the same joke has widely different answers depending on who's telling it."

"For example?" Mosaia prompted.

"OK, how many Thalacians does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"How many?"

He put on his best *basso profundo*. "A true son of Thalybdenos does not fear the dark." He resumed his normal tone. "The joke goes on to have the light bulb executed for dereliction of duty and the Thalacian who *does* change it executed for cowardice."

"For being afraid of the dark? I see! And a Carotian would say?" the paladin asked Mistra.

"I've heard two answers," she replied. "One is, `One, but they are still in darkness.'"

"Hear, hear," muttered the sword.

"The other says that the light bulb did not burn out but that its spirit fled in frustration at the futility of trying to *bring* light to the dark."

"Likewise," said Deneth, "A Thalacian would say a light bulb on Caros does not burn out but dies of boredom because there's so little to watch that's interesting. You can only observe a bunch of people praying and meditating and studying for so long, you know." He chuckled and put up a weak defense as Mistra aimed a swat at his arm.

Mosaia, too, was chuckling in spite of himself as he finished healing Mistra's wound. "All right, Mistra," he announced. "There you are." He helped her to her feet.

"That's it?" Mistra queried, looking impressed that the gash had healed seamlessly in so short a time.

"That's it," he assured her.

"I never felt a thing," she said, grinning at Deneth. "Even Torreb would have worked up more of a sweat, and I know I would have felt the energy surge."

"Their healing technique involves true mentalic contact, as I understand it," Deneth explained, glancing to Mistra for confirmation.

She nodded. "The Disciplines to form the link, the Art to channel the energy. The Erebites do it better than anyone, of course—their entire study of the Disciplines relates to forging the mental link that will, among other things, allow them to reorder their subjects' bodily functions so they can accelerate the natural healing processes. Their use of the Art, come to think of it, is almost entirely bound up with their use of the Disciplines." She gave them both a small smile. "I'd always thought of the difference between the Erebite and Carotian approaches to our talents as more of a cultural one, but now—all this talk of Orbs in which we've been engaging makes me wonder if the difference is somehow a function of the way the Orbs themselves mediate those talents." Her brow knit in thought for a moment. "Anyway, I'd always thought of the Erebite approach to healing as quite elegant, but it does seem an unwieldy amount of work after seeing this!"

"We must study one another's arts of healing as well as each other's approach to humor when we have a moment. In the meantime, pursuit is not far off, and we have yet to find our friends." He shouldered his pack,

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took up his sword, and prepared to move on. "Had the wound been deeper or involved an organ, you would have been completely aware of me, I assure you!" he remarked as he led them further from the slave market. "You are fortunate that it was not more vital, for the number of blades that were aimed in your direction and the frailty of your dress."

"Actually," she replied, "leg and arm wounds are fairly standard for my people." She touched an ornament on her belt buckle. "This is a personal shield. It protects the important bits without hampering maneuverability: if it has a weak point, it's the limbs."

He stopped and studied the ornament, which he had written off as merely decorative, with interest. "But shouldn't I have felt a tingle as I worked on you, or had my powers completely negated?"

"No. I deactivated it for you. Here. Feel." She took his hand and held it over her forearm as she reactivated the shield. He felt the tingle, and for more reasons than just the force field. Women and men did not touch so freely in his society. He was caught between the sense that he had just been forced to violate a taboo, albeit in the most pleasant of ways, and the sense that such an ingenuous gesture between comrades should be viewed as natural and taken in stride. For the first time, some of his society's taboos seemed to him hopelessly provincial.

"Folks?" Deneth prompted. He saw Mosaia's struggle and the way Mistra was taking it in and wavering over what to do about it, as if she felt as foolish retaining his hand as releasing it. When their eyes met with the same sort of fascinated awkwardness, he thought it best to intervene. "Pursuit is not far off and we have yet to find our friends?" he added, wondering if their memories needed jogging. He got two grateful looks, after which Mosaia exchanged with Mistra the sort of conciliatory glance he himself had been forced to exchange with her earlier.

They resumed their march down the street. They got as far as the crossroads before they became confounded over how to proceed. The problem, though, was easily solved when Deneth noted that the key was dragging at its chain.

"Look," he said. "It wants to go that way." It pulled quite clearly off to the right. He turned in that direction; now the key was pulling straight ahead.

"Mosaia?" asked Mistra.

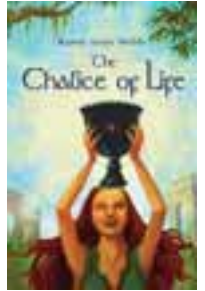
He held the Retributor aloft. "Any concentration of evil that is here seems to be straight ahead rather than off that way."

They turned right and presently found the inn as well as Sally, Alla, and T'Cru, who were sitting, frustrated, on its doorstep. They exchanged amenities and were about to try their luck with the door when Habie came tearing up the street. Before she had a chance to explain, the door to the inn swung open. There in the doorway stood Torreb.

Deneth was the first to recover the sense of composure they had all

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lost at the sight of the priest. “Well, innkeeper,” he said cheerily, “supper and a night’s lodging for seven.” He threw an arm around Mistra’s shoulders. “We’re together.” He got an elbow in the ribs and a glare, neither of which surprised him, and neither of which he supposed she intended very seriously.

“We better get inside, and quick,” Habie advised. “I ran into the smugglers in the graveyard back there—*all* of them.” She waved a hand in that general direction.

“Yes, hurry,” agreed Torreb as he ushered them in. “I’ve had a most strange experience that we must discuss before we continue.”

“*You’ve* had a strange experience?!” said a few of the others, but Sally accused, “Here, did you come in here and lock the door against the rest of us?”

“No. I didn’t come in by the door at all,” he said earnestly. “In fact, if I told you how I got here, I doubt you’d believe me.”

At that, Mistra laughed in raucous disbelief. Torreb, assuming she was laughing at him, looked wounded, but Mosaia grasped the situation and acted. “Princess,” said the knight, “you have undoubtedly seen many strange things on your travels, but I think our good priest is accustomed, like Sally and myself, to the more commonplace. I think, Torreb, that Mistra laughs because, after what the three of us experienced, she would find *anything* credible.”

“Good!” said Habie, “coz I’ve got one, too.”

“And so do we,” added Alla. “Or five, rather.”

“At least *we* got a key for our efforts,” said Deneth. He held it out for the others to inspect. “Anyone else find anything?”

“Hah!” Habie brandished the chalice. Even in the diffuse light, it shone like black fire. Her find garnered gasps of astonishment; her little face beamed triumph.

“My chalice!” Sally exclaimed, reaching for it.

“No,” Torreb corrected, restraining her with a light touch on her outstretched arm. A new timbre in his voice made them attend immediately. Handing his torch to Alla, he took the chalice and turned it over and over, regarding it for a long moment as if mesmerized. “It’s *our* chalice. The Oracle told me about it.” He went on before they could all voice their questions on the subject of oracles. “I came to myself after the quake on the steps of a huge temple. Inside was a real oracle—Nevi, oracle to the monarchs of the Hamani. I don’t know how I activated it, unless it was when I took this torch from its scone, but suddenly there it was! It said to command it, so I laid our plight before it and asked its aid. I got an earful, though some of what I heard puzzled me. After it had finished speaking to me, it opened up a kind of cosmic gate between there and here, and I simply stepped through.”

T’Cru sniffed at the chalice. “What did your oracle say to do with this?”

“It said that the proper gems must be mixed with the proper fluids—‘humours’ was the word it used, actually—in the chalice. It said the gems must come from the mine here because they’re special—something about flesh mixing with earth.” He tapped the empty socket. “He also said that

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one gem of each kind must be set into the chalice in order for it to work.” He merely looked puzzled that the chalice had come with four gems in it rather than all five or none.

“It was like that when I found it!” Habie protested, sensing and accusation. “Honest!”

“No one is accusing you, Habie,” Alla said gently.

“Go on, munchkin,” Deneth encouraged the tiny thief. “Tell them your story.” A sense of conviction and fierce protectiveness had come to his stance: anyone who wanted to get to Habie would certainly have to go through him!

Habie still looked uncertain. It was not until Mistra knelt before her and rested a hand on her shoulder that she quit regarding the rest as a rabbit might regard a pack of hounds that had cornered it far from its warren. Her eyes were drawn inexorably to Mistra’s, but she found there interest rather than suspicion. “I landed—or whatever—on top of a building above near where the smugglers were talking and followed them to the graveyard. I was doing very well staying hidden and all—I heard one of them talking about the gems and how each had a different magical power, kind of like Torreb just said—when suddenly—BAM!—the lights came on, and they saw me. I ran toward what I thought was the gate, but I must have gotten turned around because, instead of the gate, I ran into—I dunno—like an invisible wall or something, so the best I could do was to hide in this thing like a dilapidated caretaker’s hut. I found a trunk inside—I thought it was empty at the time—and hid in it just before the smugglers broke in and the trunk locked itself and they said—”

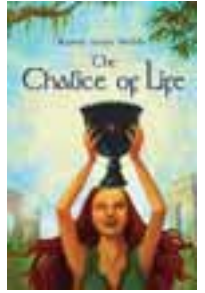
“It locked *itself*?” Sally cut in.

“Yes.” She stared defiantly at the archaeologist. “It locked itself and the smugglers came in and said the place looked like a rat-infested pesthole. They couldn’t unlock the trunk, so they figured I wasn’t inside, and they left. It was while I was trying to get the lock back open that I found this in the trunk with me.”

“Go on,” Mistra prompted when she faltered.

After Sally’s expression of disbelief, it was mainly the sense she was picking up from Mistra that the Princess believed what she was saying that helped her to go on. “Well, then the trunk unlocked itself and when I got out I was in this really pretty little cottage and not in a pesthole at all. It was furnished nicely and lit up and there was this map on the wall that I guess was the layout of this place, and around it and across the parts that were labeled the temple, the graveyard, the slave market, and this inn, there was like this pretty iridescent kind of film. That’s all. Well, wait—no, it isn’t. I *did* try to take something else—just a little incense burner, kind of as a souvenir, and then—POW!—the place turned into a dark pesthole like they had said, so I came out, dodged the smugglers and ran for it, and that’s the truth, *all* of it, I swear. Believe me, if I’d wanted to snow you guys, I would have popped the other four gems out and stuffed them down my shirt, and you’d never have known: I bet we search as hard for the one missing stone as we would have for all five!”

“Works for me,” said Deneth.



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Mistra blinked a little, as if waking from a dream, then shrugged. “Me, too. And for my money, unless someone else manipulated another object around the same time, it was Torreb’s moving the torch that caused the lights to come on, no matter what effect it had on the oracle.”

Sally burst out laughing, but any derision in her laughter she aimed chiefly at herself. “Furniture there one minute and gone the next, trunks that lock and unlock themselves? My stars and all the gods of heaven, two hours ago I would have said that was the looniest thing I had ever heard. But now...” She shook her head. “Look, even if all of this doesn’t work out, I’ll *buy* the chalice from you, even without the missing stone.”

“Yeah?” chirped Habie. “How much?”

“Ladies!” shrieked the sword. “How can you put a monetary value on that without which we have no hope of making well a noble creature who is ill? ‘Tis most unbecoming!”

“What was that?” Habie and Sally exclaimed together. They started and landed back-to-back as if ready to repulse an attack.

“Oh, just my sword,” Mosaia said offhandedly. “Your point is taken,” he said to the blade, “but allow me to handle this.”

“Oh.” Its voice was suddenly so meek they could envision it slouching like a whipped cur. “Tsk. I thought I sounded dauntingly imperious just then, but you carry on as best you can.”

“Thank you.” From the way he bit off the words, the sword’s disposition was wearing down even his amiable disposition.

Sally had gone white again, but Habie was jumping up and down and clapping her hands in glee. “It talks! It talks! This is great!” said Habie, but Sally’s comment was “This isn’t happening.” She said it many times. Torreb took pity and slid a chair under her so she might sit before she simply keeled over.

“What experience did you three have?” T’Cru directed to Mistra, Mosaia, and Deneth.

“We explored the slave market,” explained Deneth, “and had to work to avoid ending up on the block ourselves—or on a slab in whatever passed for a morgue around here. We started out just feeling creepy, or having the sense that something was brushing against one of us every few seconds. Then we began to see phantasms, more and more the farther we got into the market, and when I grabbed this key from the place they kept the slaves penned for auction—Bach’s your uncle!—they solidified. The slavers captured Mistra, and we had to cut our way out.”

“You were not pursued?”

“Initially, yes, but the whole scene vanished as we left the market square. I don’t doubt Habie’s trunk was trapped with the same sort of spell, and maybe Torreb himself was pulled back in time to talk to that oracle.”

“Again for my money,” said Mistra, “this place is just crawling with time traps.”

“Your stories have many similar elements besides the possibility of time travel,” suggested T’Cru.

“How so?” asked Alla.

“Well, all of them are associated with the removal of some object.”

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“Is it as Mistra suggested?” asked Mosaia. “Weaknesses in the fabric of time?”

“Living on Caros gives one—even one in whom the Art is not inborn—a certain outlook. Though I am no mage, I would not doubt her evaluation, especially after *our* experiences.” Prompted by the others, he recounted the four scenes that he personally had witnessed, then let Alla and Sally relate the details of the fifth.

“I think in our story and Habie’s,” said Sally, “I’m beginning to see why this is such a small settlement. This is not the entire undercity at all, but only a tiny part of it. If I’m going to accept that Father Gelis’ curse took effect, I guess I can accept that all that was preserved of this place was the areas of the city that held the elements necessary to make these elixirs.”

“Habie’s description of the map she found makes me wonder,” Mistra speculated. “As Mosaia suggested to us, we must have been shunted here through a portal of some sort, or we’d all have broken necks. The whole area must be protected so one can only enter it through that portal that appeared as the ground quaked. This place is effectively its own tiny dimension, and those four corners must be time sensitive, the true time wrinkle occurring when certain specific items were moved. The abrupt lighting of the whole place may have been a function of the same sort of spell.”

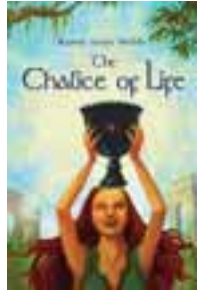
“If the place is circumscribed that way,” reasoned Deneth, “those smugglers will ferret us out sooner rather than later. If there’s an entrance to the mine here, we’d better get busy and find it. How about Habie and I get to work making sure opening the door will slow the smugglers down in a big way while the rest of you search for a way into the mine, assuming there *is* one.”

“All right,” Mosaia said, his voice decisive. “But might I suggest Mistra stay behind to help you on the chance the door is magicked to repel your efforts—judiciously, of course, after the way the ground above responded to her attempt to protect us.” He waited for the three of them to signal agreement, then led the rest off to search the inn for the mine entrance.

“Good,” Deneth whispered to the two women as the others dispersed. He rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation. “I spied bottles of what may be a respectable vintage and a cask of good ale behind the bar. We *should* sample them—for safety’s sake!—before we alert the others to their presence.”

“Sure!” Habie enthused. “Don’t want them expecting wine and getting vinegar now, do we?”

“Here, Habie, I’ll have a first go at the lock with Mistra looking over my shoulder if you can quietly open the cask and pilfer some of the wine.” Habie set to with alacrity while he and Mistra knelt next to the lock. While Mistra looked on, he ran his hands slowly over the door in an effort to sense the focus of the spell that had held it shut. It took him a full minute of painstaking work to find the spot he sought. “Here,” he said to Mistra.



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“What do you think of this?”

She touched a hand to the spot he had indicated on the door and concentrated for a few seconds. “Mmm... spelled shut, but I can’t quite fathom the magicks involved: it *could* be an enchantment that would admit the smugglers now that the door’s been opened once. The way my spell misfired before, it might be safer for you and Habie to try to gimmick the lock than for me to place a spell strong enough to override permanently whatever’s keeping it shut just now.”

He considered. “What about this, then? Habie and I jam not only the lock, but wedge the door itself with *our* skills, but you put a good word on our tools and materials—strength, accuracy, durability. Then you wouldn’t be casting a spell directly on an ensorcelled door, but we still have the benefit of your magic against it.”

“Good thinking,” she said, giving him a thoughtful look and clapping him on the shoulder in a show of approbation as she stood and went to retrieve Habie.

Though she had meant to provoke with neither the look nor the touch, Deneth briefly lost his ability to concentrate on the problem at hand. He wished Bradys or Kort were here for him to exchange a look with, but he settled for a solitary, surreptitious mug directed only at the universe in general. Pheromones aside, Mistra was a very beautiful woman with a very vibrant spirit, and a man would have to be deaf, dumb, blind, psi-null, and stupid not to find her attractive!

Yet it’s more, infinitely more than gut attraction, he thought, *though the friendship bit still seems to be developing in fits and starts at times.* The intuitive nature of that friendship was something new for him. Strange and wonderful as it was, he was still wrestling with its presence. It was as if a divine being had popped up one day, pointed to Mistra, and said, “Here is one whom you can trust—whom you *will* trust—with your life and the life of your soul.” In his experience, one built a friendship from the ground up, much the way one would follow the growth of a tree; so fundamental a trust was earned. This was like having the crown of the tree handed to him with the expectation that he would work backwards to bring into being the trunk and branches; he had done nothing to merit the trust and was now being asked to prove himself worthy of it.

That Mistra was—that any of the other questors were—someone around whom he could let down his guard so he could, by word or deed, justify that trust was also something new and strange. He could not yet tell whether it was also wonderful: that would require far more practice at responding from the heart. There was an unwritten code of behavior on Thalas. One acted (and spoke) in the way most likely to impale (or offend or incense) the unwary: only those who remained standing after the dust had settled were people with whom one considered striking up a friendship. Unveil your heart too soon, and you were a dead man.

Shaking off the brief glamor, he pulled some odds and ends from his pack and had Habie do the same. Habie produced not only her set of lock picks but some fragments of wood they could use to wedge the door. She also trotted out two bottles of wine, one of brandy, and two waterskins now

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filled with ale. “Here we go, folks,” she said, drawing samples for them.

Mistra touched each tool in turn and set in place the spells Deneth had suggested, then turned her attention to the brandy—and nearly choked. “Gods!” she sputtered. “It’s like liquid fire! This one gets set aside for Torreb’s first aid kit.” She stashed it in her pack for later distribution. Having finished with the lockpicks, she turned her attention to the shards of wood Habie had produced, ensorcelling them but also reshaping them a bit to fit the parts of the door they were trying to wedge.

“I thought you guys couldn’t even *taste* alcohol.”

“We can *taste* it,” she clarified, “especially when it’s there in quantity. We just don’t react to it the way most humanoid species do.”

“I found out the hard way,” observed Deneth as he retrieved his lockpicks and set about jamming the lock, “that what the Carotians consider ale has a kick worse than the strongest hard liquor ever brewed on Thalas. But I think you’d actually have to excise a Carotian’s brain from his head and dunk it directly *in* the stuff quite a few times before he’d even notice a slight buzz. Well, either that or keep sticking him in a time machine so he relives the moment over and over till the stuff builds up in his blood.” They had a good laugh over that image. “Here, Habie, see if you can better the job I’ve done here.”

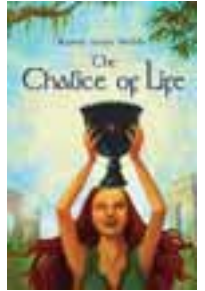
“Right, folks,” said Habie. “Stand aside and let the mistress of her craft step in and deliver the *coup de grace*.” Laugh number two over her reference to Deneth’s earlier comment. “So drunken euphoria is something you guys really can’t experience? I’d heard the stories, but I figured since wine making is an art you humans practice, it had to be for some reason other than the taste and the chemistry. Really, that’s too bad!”

“Don’t worry,” laughed Mistra. “There are substances that are plenty bioactive in a Carotian—including what’s in the ale that caused Deneth’s hangover—though most are more difficult to come by. And I’ll save you the trouble of making any wisecracks about our lack of experience with temptation. I think any PR on that subject from other cultures has more to do with the commentator’s lack of ability to imagine what would tempt a people like us than with our inability to succumb.” And the three of them shared another good laugh over her analysis.

While Habie put the finishing touches on the lock, Mistra scooped up the slips of wood with which she had been tinkering and started handing them one by one to Deneth. As he was still sitting and she was variously crouching or leaning over, he failed utterly in his efforts to keep his eyes from wandering. The words, “Oooo, nice view,” slipped out.

Mistra looked mortified for all of a microsecond before she regrouped. “Ah,” she said smoothly. “You’re trying to drive me away.”

He chuckled. “Most women would have interpreted it as an offer to get a whole lot closer.” He glued his eyes to the door and kept working, but he felt her arch an eyebrow at him. “OK, OK,” he went on. He reached out like a mundane surgeon putting his hand out for an instrument and felt Mistra slap more of the wood fragments into his palm. “I was just -oh- call it window shopping.” He hazarded a glance upward and saw that the remark had gotten him an amused grin. “Besides, you’ve already seen to the depths



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of my soul and not run off screaming into the night." The rest had come out loudly enough for Habie to hear, and, indeed, she was chortling as she worked. But the last came out in a tender whisper, and they exchanged a very private sort of smile.

"You know," said Habie as she finished tampering with the lock, "Mistra's told me she knows she only looks buxom in relation to most of her dancer friends. I think what she wants to say is, 'Window shop all you like, 'coz she's not used to hearing men say she has any kind of goods to display at all.'" This netted her two playful swats.

"That should do it," Deneth pronounced a moment later as he wedged a final fragment of wood between the door and the frame.

"Even if the magic releases the lock," Habie explained, "they'll need an expert lock picker with good tools—or a battering ram—to get through." They packed up the bottles and skins and went in search of the others.

The others had traversed the entire upper story of the inn and most of the private parlors on the main floor without finding any sign of the way into the mine. Mosaia chided himself for being discouraged—after all, the upper story was not a logical place to look for a mine entrance. The door itself was likely to be well hidden if it were on the first floor and concealed magically if it were another gate rather than a physical doorway. The real search he had delegated to Alla and T'Cru for their superior senses and to Sally for her more extensive background.

"Our Sally seems to be integrating better into the party," Torreb said with a smile as he and Mosaia watched the other three evaluate a hearthstone for a hidden mechanism. "At least, if she's not completely accepted the existence of magic, she's no longer deriding it."

"I think Mistra might say she's doing as any good scientist ought," Mosaia returned, "and getting on with the job at hand in despite of her own preconceived notions of how the universe works."

The five of them moved on to another room and began tapping the floors and walls in hope that they would find some sort of concealed compartment. As they did so, Torreb thought to himself that this was also true of Mosaia. It fit what he knew of the paladin that such observations would be beneath his notice. Unused to magic as he must be, Mosaia was adapting to its presence better than many outworlders might; Torreb could see him factoring it into his analyses and plans with the facile logic of one born to the Art.

And truly, fine warrior and strategist that he was, Mosaia would have viewed these qualities in himself as no more than his sincere desire to serve God, to deploy his men in a way that combined getting the job done with sparing life and limb, and to be as humane as possible in his dealings with his enemies. Those who remarked upon his creativity or compassion, his wit or wisdom or ready adaptability to that which lay outside his paradigm, or suggested that all these qualities meant a Power had marked him for greatness, received but a single, consistent reply. There was, Mosaia would

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remind the observer, but one Font in the universe from which those qualities could spring; better, he would suggest, that the observer direct his praise there.

The five of them now joined together in a final effort in the one room they had not yet searched. Mosaia applied his strength to moving the oddly well-preserved furniture. Torreb carefully pulled up one rug after another. T'Cru sniffed and Alla sensed and Sally examined a series of runes etched across the mantelpiece. Again, they came up empty. Mosaia finally rounded them up and led them back to the common room. Together, they sat down and sought to rethink the problem.

"I don't think we missed any rooms, do you?" asked Sally.

"No," Alla agreed. "I'll swear there was nothing hollow about those walls and floors unless they had obvious rooms adjoining them."

"Damn. Give me a ruined crypt any day. At least most of the rooms are falling apart and easier to search!"

"You look like folks who could use a drink," said Deneth, joining them. He nodded to Habie, who produced a few more bottles of wine and offered them for Mosaia's inspection.

"See what we found while we were gimmicking the door?" she announced. "Mistra says the brandy's way too strong, but we all thought this was pretty good."

"Oh, dear," Mosaia remarked with a good-natured laugh, "corruption is setting in sooner than I anticipated." He sampled the wine, then passed the bottle to Alla. "Smooth, very nice," was his appraisal. "The blasted thing of it is, we seem to be out of places to search. Two floors, no attic, and these good people have found no sign of a trap door or secret passage anywhere."

Mistra considered. "Another gate?"

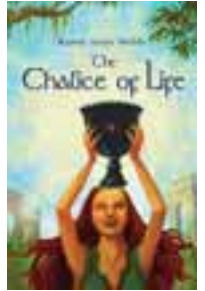
"I'd thought of that, but if it is so, it's something that resists being revealed by clerical magic. Both Torreb and I tried."

"On the map," said Habie, "this place *was* one of the ones covered with that filmy stuff, like the graveyard and the slave market." She brightened. "Do you think we really went back in time?"

"Yes, I do," Mistra confirmed. "I think the things we needed were hidden long ago, dispersed in time and space by the curse you three saw pronounced, and that we were permitted just enough of a glimpse of the past to let us dip in and retrieve them." She smiled wanly. "Perhaps we're that party that's 'sufficiently high of heart' to let the curse turn back on itself."

"We *are* seeking the chalice to aid those other than ourselves," reasoned Mosaia, "even though in the end it will get us through the Portal. If there *is* one power behind all of this, one consciousness, as T'Cru's tale suggests, it would be reassuring to think that it is one that *wants* us to help the dragons."

Sally sipped the wine. "It would make *my* job easier if things like that really happened on a regular basis. I mean, who would need a degree of any sort? You would just walk into a ruin with pure enough motives and the artifacts would unearth themselves *for* you." It was thoughtful rather than derisive, and it netted good-natured laughter. She passed the bottle to



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T'Cru, looking uncertain whether Tigroids could drink from bottles but not wanting to exclude him on an assumption.

"Thank you," said T'Cru. "Just tilt that a bit for me, would you?" He guzzled contentedly, like a lamb suckling from a bottle. Suddenly his nose twitched. "What a peculiar odor."

"The wine?"

"No." He snuffled. "The bottle. Musty, I guess you'd call it."

"Of course it's musty," said Mistra. "Even on Caros, vintners lay their wines down in cellars to age. The wine cellars under the palace at home are a whole maze-work the size of a small city. They're kept dark and humid on purpose..." Her voice trailed off.

There was a beat of silence. Then all eight of them exclaimed at once, "A wine cellar!"

Quickly, they scattered to inspect the floor of the common room to look for a door leading not out or up but down.

The floor trap still proved elusive. There was not a ghost of an echo to suggest a hollow area beneath their feet, and they only succeeded in locating the spot when the Retributor suggested that Mosaia was standing on a slight declivity. Habie succeeded then in defining a section of floor perhaps a meter square set so cunningly among the floorboards that even in the bright light of their torches its borders could not be seen. The lock, when she found it, was so intricate that it took both her skills and Deneth's to get it unlocked, and the trap itself was so heavy that, once unlocked, it took all Deneth's strength and Mosaia's together to lift it. The torch revealed a steep wooden stair leading down into blackness.

As they stood contemplating the eerie darkness, T'Cru's ears pricked up. "Good sirs and ladies," he announced. "I hear the sounds of pursuit. I suggest we do not hesitate in pressing ahead now that our way is clear."

Seeing no one was jumping at the chance to descend first into whatever lay beneath them, Mistra took the initiative. Dark, closed places evoked the beginnings of panic in her, but there was no one else here as equipped to deal with an unknown threat that could as easily be magical as physical. "We need more torches," she informed them as she began the descent. She had drawn her sword, which cast a pale radiance, but she was unable to direct it: the stair proved to be so steep she had to descend it as she would a ladder.

"No time," snapped Mosaia. "Just get everyone to the bottom safely so we can shut the trap."

"What if we're—well—trapped?" Sally whined.

"We already are if the smugglers are so close we can hear them," said Mistra. She reached the bottom without incident and stepped gingerly aside. The floor seemed solid enough and she could not truly sense a hostile

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will here. As the others reached the bottom safely, more torches were lit, but the room remained dark beyond the immediate area, as though the blackness defied the light to penetrate it. She could see, however, that their surmise had been correct: the room into which she had descended was packed with bottles and casks.

From above, she could hear pounding on the inn door. Mosaia, who had been keeping the trap door from closing against the possibility the smugglers would bypass the inn, now let it slip into place. It made only the tiniest of clicks, but it was a disconcerting sound in the dead silence that fell around them.

“At least that trap door should stall them if they get inside the inn,” said Deneth. “Let’s get looking.”

“I have claustrophobia,” Sally admitted in a small voice.

“You?” he guffawed. “An archaeologist?”

“Most ruins lay open to the sky, I expect,” said Mistra. She took Sally’s hand. “Come on. You and I will look together. I have ways of allaying fear—in others, at least.” She flashed Sally a wry smile. When Mosaia had shut the trap behind them, she had experienced a moment of panic, but hearing her less experienced comrade enumerate exactly the same fear made her shelve her own alarm in favor of offering assistance to another.

She held her own torch aloft. The room was only about eight feet high. She could not truly make out the shape of the room because of the racks of bottles and stacks of casks that lay all around them, but clearly defined aisles led away from the base of the ladder. They split up to search: Mistra went with Sally and Deneth, Alla with T’Cru and Torreb, and Mosaia with Habie. Five minutes’ search turned up nothing, although Mistra had been able to put a light suggestion on Sally’s mind that the room was taller and had many windows.

“Time to regroup,” said Deneth as they met again under the stairway. “We’re approaching this wrong.”

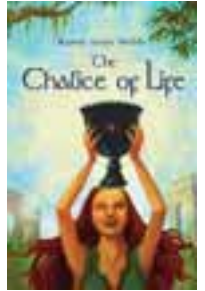
“Try the chalice,” suggested Alla. “Maybe the gems will brighten the way the Portal Stone does.”

Torreb took it out and swung it in a wide arc. There was no noticeable change. They heaved a collective sigh.

“Deneth!” Mosaia said suddenly. “The key. It pointed the way here but has been of no use as yet.”

“Of course!” said Deneth. He pulled it from around his neck and let it hang freely depended from its chain. It swung in a circle for a moment before it settled into place pulling toward the north end of the room. They followed it to the northernmost wall, which was lined with a row of casks. The key seemed to favor one a bit to the right. “Well, we’ve had to move something every other time to cause Mistra’s time slips, as T’Cru noticed. Here, Mosaia, give me a hand.”

Together, they lifted the cask from the rack. Immediately, all eight of them (even Sally) had a sense of years falling from the age of the room. No



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overt change occurred; it was more a feeling that the oppressiveness had lifted, or that they could breathe again.

"There's nothing back there," Habie complained. "I checked it myself earlier."

"You checked it, I think, many years hence," Mosaia pointed out.

"Look!" said Sally. A blank brass plate had appeared on the wall behind the spot where the cask had been sitting. "Deneth, use the key!"

"On what?" he asked. "It's a blank plate."

"Oh, please try!"

"I feel real silly," he muttered, but he did as she asked. To their astonishment, the key seemed to melt into the plate, sliding in as easily as if it had been thrust into a keyhole it had been made to fit. There was a groan as of a door long disused pressed into service. But instead of a door, they saw a tiny spot of luminescence flicker to life in the exact center of the plate. It grew slowly till it formed a luminous round portal. At its outer edge, where it met the wall, the portal coalesced into an argus of golden light. Opacity faded to translucency till, in the center, a space like a transparent window formed. Through that window, they could see a portion of a cave beyond. "Me first?" Deneth asked once it became clear the portal was as fully formed as it was going to get. He sounded less than enthusiastic.

They looked at one another.

"I'll go," Mistra volunteered again as the silence grew uncomfortable. "But it'll cost you," she whispered to Deneth as he helped her through, then followed. Once through, she saw that her torch easily illuminated a sphere ten meters across, but the cavern walls themselves provided them with enough light to steer by. They stood in a chamber the size of a cathedral from which led a number of passages. It seemed canny enough, so they waved the others through.

"Time gate?" Deneth wondered as they waited for the others.

"I think so," said Mistra. "It feels like we're back in our own time again."

Together, as the others came through the gate, they peered down the passages. There were five of them, all leading roughly northwest. The lintel across each archway bore a different carving: the stones were not actually pigmented but were circumscribed with mineral salts that suggested the identity of each. From what they could discern, the carvings represented a many-faceted diamond, a round sapphire, a marquis cut emerald, a bullet shaped moonstone, and a bevel-cut ruby. The small company stood wondering quietly at the marvelous archways.

Presently, Habie, who had taken the chalice back from Torreb to examine it further, said, "If this is any guide, we should look through that archway marked with the ruby. That's the missing stone." Her eyes lit up. "With luck, there'll be plenty for all!" She looked to the others for confirmation of both hypotheses and saw that while the first met with general approval, the second generated everything from an indulgent smile to a scowl. "What? What'd I say?" Feeling she could redeem herself with bravery for whatever crime she had just committed, she marched valiantly

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toward the portal, but Mosaia gripped her arm and gently restrained her.

"Let those more experienced than you lead while we still can," he said kindly. "Traps, there may be laid here."

She pulled out the spectacles Tuhl had given her and popped them on her nose. "Then I shall find them," she said solemnly.

Deneth chuckled amiably. "She's right, Mosaia. In the arts of stealth, she's *my* better, so she must be yours. And rule number one of thief-craft is never to get killed en route to your target!"

Mosaia shook his head. "God in Heaven!" he said, purposely overdramatizing. "Talking with swords and now relying on thieves to find me safe passage! What *am* I coming to?"

"You've fallen in with a bad lot, Lord Clear Water," Mistra said, playing along. "Thieves, heathen priests, enchantresses, sentient animalkind. Tsk. You'll come to a bad end this way, if you want to know." She jumped back a pace as Habie tripped a concealed wire that sent a plate of spikes fifteen centimeters long shooting up through the floor.

"OK!" Habie chirped delightedly.

"Did you use the glasses?" asked Deneth, as one professional to another.

"Yeah. I guess they helped a little."

"Keep them on, eh? Mosaia, after you."

Mosaia gave him a dark look but took the lead. With him in front went Habie, her glasses perched on her nose, her small head flicking this way and that in an effort to locate any more traps. Torreb and Alla flanked Sally, while Deneth, T'Cru and Mistra brought up the rear. The tunnel curved sufficiently to afford them some cover. They would have heard any pursuit long before it spotted them, and Mistra's blade was spelled to deflect blaster fire. Still, being rearguard was no more comfortable than taking the lead and scouting what they had seen could be deadly traps.

"Think they've broken through yet?" Deneth asked Mistra when he noted a look of concern on her face.

"Not yet," she said quietly. "But soon, I think, despite your handiwork."

"Well, there's still finding the trap into the wine cellar and opening it, and then moving the right cask."

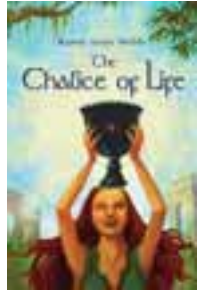
"But we couldn't move the cask back into place," T'Cru informed them. "We were afraid that the portal would close and the person who had moved the cask would be trapped on the other side, or in the other time, or however one expresses such a thing. We feared, too, that closing the portal might cut off our only means of escape, a means we must not lose even if escape that way were to lead us into the arms of those rogues."

"Oh. Good." There was the edge of a high-pitched squeak to his voice, as if he were saying "I can cope with this" when he just barely meant it.

"You must agree it couldn't be helped."

"We must be the more attentive," said Mistra.

Although the passage wound, it now led roughly northeast. They encountered no more traps, or indeed anything at all interesting, till they came a hundred meters or so later to the end of the passage and confronted



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a deep cavern. The cavern was lit more brightly than the passage, and now they could see the light's source: bioluminescent moss. It clung to the cavern walls and was spread so thickly in places and colored so richly that it gave the impression that the chamber was hung with tapestries. Otherwise, the chamber was empty—save for one fist-sized ruby protruding from the north wall at what was about eye level for Deneth and Mosaia.

Torreb's eyes lit up (as did Habie's, Deneth's, Mistra's, and Sally's, each for a different reason). He put his hand to it; it fell easily into his palm. "Could it go in the chalice?" he asked the others.

"It's *huge*," said Sally. "It can't possibly fit the socket."

"Try it," Mistra suggested. "Remember how the key fused with that locking plate, though it seemed to have no keyhole."

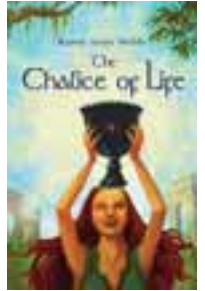
He followed Mistra's advice, though he doubted. To his surprise, the moment the two touched, space pulled a little sleight of hand, and ruby and socket fused. The chalice glowed briefly with a warm, golden light, as if it were exulting in having been made whole once again.

"Well done!" Mosaia enthused.

"Yes," agreed Torreb, looking mystified that it should be so. "Still, it's only the first step. We must find the right gem and its proper 'humour,' whatever *that* may be."

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CHAPTER 9



Solutions

“This human rational soul is the One’s creation... The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul.”

—The Book of Life

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Habie, involved in her own pursuit of gems not essential to the quest, had already turned on the sensor and begun scanning in hopes of finding more rubies. She gave a little grunt of exasperation after a moment. “Nothing,” she announced. “The room is totally empty of gemstones except for the one ruby.” She said “Nothing” again in four or five different languages, then swore. No one had exactly promised her a big haul, but she felt either the cavern or some deity with a perverse sense of humor had just betrayed her fledgling sense of trust in the universe.

“Can it read across walls?” asked Deneth.

“Oh, yeah. I get emeralds and diamonds in the next couple of rooms, before the signal fades out. It’ll just mean more work.”

“Cheer up,” said Torreb. “We had to visit the other rooms

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anyway to collect some of each stone. We don't know exactly which the dragon will need."

Mistra sat considering the architecture of the emerald room while the others stuffed their pockets and packs full of gems. The structure here was identical to the structure they had found in the ruby and sapphire rooms, though the configuration had not been obvious till they had come to a room with more than one gem in it. Chiseled into the walls high above lay slender channels, fissures in the living rock that rose to unguessed heights as they vanished into the darkness above. If one focused on just the area marked with channels, it was most like looking at the longitude markings on a globe from a point placed deep within and just below the equator. But it was also like looking at a room done with very tall wainscoting: an invisible line of demarcation ran around the room about four meters from the floor. Between the line and the floor lay gems but no channels; above the line lay only channels. It was as if an earth deity with a strange aesthetic had inscribed the line, then directed the gems to one side and channels to the other. The channels in each room they had visited were, to a one, stained with a pigmented substance that did not seem to be more moss. The substance had been a rusty brown in the ruby room and a milky white in the sapphire room; in this room, it was a bilious yellow-green.

"Mosaia," she called to the knight after she had pondered all this for a good five minutes. He and T'Cru were the only others in the party whose enthusiasm over collecting handfuls of gems had played out earlier than hers. "Could you give me a boost? Up there?" She pointed to the line of demarcation.

He followed her gaze upwards. "I see you, too, are curious about this configuration," he said. "I'd been contemplating it myself. Here you go." He helped her to her feet, then boosted her into a shoulder sit; from there, he braced her ankles as she stood. She was just tall enough that, by extending her arms and stretching out, she could reach a pocket of the greenish stain and scrape a bit of it into her palm. T'Cru obliged them both by nosing in Mistra's pack and pulling out a small pouch he found there. He tossed it to Mosaia, who tossed it to Mistra, who emptied her palm into it.

"I wonder if that sensor Habie nicked could be rewired to analyze organic molecules," she mused as Mosaia lowered her to the floor.

"Why?" asked Mosaia. "What is it?"

She shook her head as he helped her down. "What I think is pretty bizarre."

He chuckled. "Bizarre would at the least be consistent with the rest of this adventure. I give you my oath I will never deride you for using your imagination."

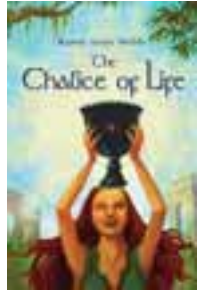
"Nor any woman for any reason at all, I suspect," she said with an affectionate smile that did not quite disguise her appreciation of the sentiment. "To defend my thesis, I'll have to act like a good little scientist and collect scrapings from the other rooms. Are you game?"

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KAREN ANNE WELLS

"I am most heartily at your disposal, but we must hurry. It would be unwise for us to allow the smugglers to discover us divided. Perhaps T'Cru will come with us to guard our backs?"

To Mistra's relief, T'Cru consented. "All right," she said as they struck out for the ruby room, "here goes..."



The others waited till the trio had completed its foray before proceeding. Mosaia's caution about moving along quickly was one they all took seriously, yet they now understood that neither could they rush blindly ahead. Each corridor so far had been trapped. In the one leading to the sapphire room, Habie had identified a trap door that led to a cavern from which emanated a number of bestial roars. How many beasts could have survived to trouble them now, they could not guess: perhaps in the pit lay another time gate, and the creatures existed in the own past. The entry to the emerald room featured one that released a pair of gigantic hammers that would have smashed to a pulp anyone caught between them.

Now, Habie crept ahead, her special glasses perched once more on her nose. The rest heard her muttering things to herself like, "Here, little trip wire; come out, come out, wherever you are." For nearly a minute, she inched forward with meticulous care, looking this way and that. Suddenly, she brightened. "Got it! Very clever. The trigger for this one's a pressure plate in the floor." She backed, signaling to the rest to do likewise. Casting about, she picked up a largish stone from the piles of rubble that lay strewn about the place and tossed it so it landed squarely in the center of the plate.

With a rumble and a sound like stone grating on stone, a section of the floor immediately beyond the pressure plate dropped out.

"More of the big, mean, and ravenous?" asked Deneth.

"Dunno." She scampered forward to look. "Looks deep, whatever it is." She grabbed another stone and tossed it through the opening. The others bunched in around her to listen for the sound of the rock striking bottom.

"Oh, dear," Mistra said some time later. She had felt her heart beat at least 30 times and had not yet heard anything to suggest the rock had completed its descent.

Habie deactivated the trap, and they moved forward into the diamond room. While the others continued to cram gems into packs (including her own), Mistra scraped the channels with Mosaia's help, then set about snipping and stripping and rewiring and tinkering. Presently, she had reconfigured the sensor that Habie had surrendered so that, in addition to scanning and locating crystalline structures, it would analyze and identify elementary organic molecules.

"Do you know what?" Sally spoke up abruptly as Mistra set about analyzing the rusty red substance from the channels in the ruby room. "I think we must have come far enough and in the right direction that we must be under the graveyard."

"So?" asked Habie.

"Well, I was thinking about Torreb's reference to 'humours.' That's an

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archaic term for bodily fluids, and, to the best of my knowledge, the Hamani buried their dead without embalming and without coffins.”

“Eew.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Alla, interested despite Habie’s show of revulsion.

“I don’t know. Some relationships between the gems and the corpses, I guess. Don’t you remember the soldier we saw remarking that the more people died during that plague, the more gems there seemed to be?”

“Double—no, *triple!*—eew,” was Habie’s assessment, “and loopy.”

“Maybe not,” Mistra corrected. Her makeshift analyzer had begun to click out its test results. “Here’s the readout on the stuff in the ruby room. It was blood.” She flashed Mosaia a grin of thanks for having encouraged her in the notion that that was just what it might be.

“How about the other stuff?” asked Deneth. He found the idea bizarre in the extreme; nonetheless, it intrigued him.

“It’ll take a minute. I’d feel better if we were to push on without waiting for the results.”

“Yes,” Alla agreed with a shiver. “Our pursuit is getting closer—I can feel it.”

They pushed on to the final cave, the one containing moonstones. The trap in this hallway consisted of another pressure plate and a mechanism that lobbed a volley of fire-tipped spears at any who tripped it.

“I would have agreed to come along a whole lot quicker if the King and Queen had said there would be fringe benefits like this!” Habie announced as she tried to stuff a last few moonstones into an already bulging pack.

“You feel yourself adequately compensated for the dearth of rubies?” chuckled Torreb.

“Sure do!”

Deneth grunted. “What about the smugglers and the traps?”

She shrugged. “I *expected* it would be dangerous.”

“I complement you on your skills,” said Mosaia, “and I thank you for my life. This adventure would likely have ended here within sight of our goal for some of us had you not agreed to come.”

Habie positively beamed at the compliment.

The entire party found itself at once marveling over the richness of the find and wondering why four of the caves overflowed with precious stones while one had contained but a single gem. As the rest fit a few final moonstones into the packs that were bulging the least, Mistra set about collecting the final specimen from the channels in the moonstone room. Just as she finished, the jury-rigged machine had begun to spit out the information on the substances from the emerald, sapphire, and diamond rooms.

“I don’t know, Sally,” Mistra said as she mulled over the results. “You may have had something there when you suggested a connection between their burial practices and the gemstones. Look.” They crowded around while she displayed the data tape: the analyzer had identified molecules consistent with there being dried seminal fluid in the channels in the sapphire room, gastric fluid in those in the emerald room, and urine in

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those in the diamond room.

Sally's grin was one of bemusement. "Not quite the traditional humours of the body."

"What *are*?" asked Habie.

"Blood, phlegm, and black and green bile."

"Quadruple eew."

She shook her head. "But that would mean someone was sitting around siphoning off the bodily fluids of the dead and sending each one down a different way. That's silly."

"Yet many things to which you have also applied that term have turned out to be so," Mosaia admonished.

"You're right, you're right," she said, shaking her head apologetically. "It's all so strange." She frowned. "I don't know geology *that* well, of course, but I wonder if the rock is different in each cave, more porous or permeable or something, so it acts as a filter. Maybe each room only lets one fluid through and all the rest are stopped cold, or react with the rock so they decompose. Stars of heaven! Listen to me!" She laughed at her own flight of fancy.

"Theory aside," Torreb queried, "what do we do to determine what stone the dragon needs? I suppose Mistra's learned for us which fluid needs to be mixed with each stone, but how do we learn which solution to use?"

"You did the mindlink," Mistra pointed out. "Didn't you get a sense of what was wrong?"

He considered. "Well, of all the things you've mentioned, I'd have been inclined to say it was in the blood. But there are no more rubies, so if that's the case, what do we do? I suppose, even with the ruby from the cave in place, it would take more than any ordinary ruby to make the spell work."

"What about using the sapphires? Their molecular structure is practically identical."

"No. No, the oracle said we must beware of mixing a gem with a fluid other than the one to which it is sympathetic."

"Boom?" She mimed an explosion.

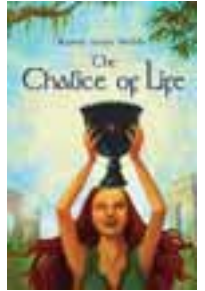
"Well, he didn't come right out and specify, but..." He shrugged. "Besides, if it were a matter of physical structure only, why would there be a need for these specific gems?"

To that question, no one had a ready answer.

"Maybe you could work T'Cru into the link next time," Deneth suggested. "Perhaps one beast would be better understood by another, eh, T'Cru?" Getting no response, he looked around. "T'Cru?"

They were just wondering whether or not to become alarmed when they heard a snarl come echoing up the hall. It was followed by a chorus of harsh voices and the sound of blaster fire. An instant later, T'Cru came catapulting through the archway.

Moments earlier, T'Cru had felt his hackles rise at the perception of some half-guessed sound. Feeling rather useless—the machines and magic



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were beyond him, and being a member of the royal family gave him all the material wealth he desired—he had padded off down the tunnel to investigate. His ebony fur and ability to move silently served him well: although he came to the tunnel mouth just as the smugglers were stepping through the portal, they did not spot him for some moments. He had plenty of time to eavesdrop—and to scheme.

“Must have come this way,” Black Jack was saying.

“Yeah, but *which* way?” one of his men had wondered.

“Easy enough to wait out here till they come back and pick ‘em off one by one, eh?”

“Only what if there’s a way out beyond these tunnels? We could be sitting here till the end of eternity and them making off with all the jewelry.”

T’Cru had decided to act while that idea was fresh in their minds. If the smugglers waited here, he and his friends *could* be picked off—or starved out. But if they could be lured up the tunnel, matters could fall out much differently. He gauged the distance to the man nearest him, gathered himself, and sprang. He landed squarely on the pirate’s back, flattening him, then roared once for effect, sank his canines into the loose folds of the fellow’s shirt and dragged him away toward the moonstone tunnel.

What a pitiable sight! thought T’Cru as the man panicked, dropped his blaster, and began clawing the air for aid that simply refused to materialize. Cowardice was ugly enough in his own kind; in the physically inferior humans, it was positively loathsome!

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The rest of the pirate band had backed at their first sight of T’Cru; most had dropped whatever weapon—blade or blaster—they had been holding at the time. He didn’t give them time to recover before he hauled their confederate away. He kept to his task even when blaster fire forced him to conclude they had recovered: at least he knew he had their attention, and that they were pursuing him as he had hoped they would.

He had dragged the man almost to the cave mouth before two energy bolts grazing his coat told him pursuit was as close as he wanted it to get before he summoned aid. Expecting his pursuers would continue close behind, he dropped the pirate virtually on the threshold of the moonstone cave and bounded inside.

“What was it?” one of the smugglers whispered.

Black Jack peered cautiously around a curve in the tunnel. T’Cru had set him a pretty puzzle. He and his men had been singularly intent on their pursuit of Habie, Deneth, and Mosaia in the ruined upper city. They had just barely noticed Mistra and Torreb, but Sally had been hidden, and Alla and T’Cru had appeared as no more than streaks of monochrome when the ground had broken open. T’Cru had been marginally more describable just now when he had grabbed Poll and dragged him off. That the creature might be a member of the other party had occurred to him—who else, after all, would have a reason to be down here?—but his other thought was that

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it might be some species of cave dweller brought to life by the intrusion of the unwary, one that fed on the blood of those who dared wake him. It would not have been the oddest thing they had seen since they had transported down!

Now his concern was whether his lost crewman was worth the danger if the rest of them tried to rescue him. This, of course, was a weak point in T'Cru's reasoning. Tigroids were a fierce but honorable race, and the thought of deserting a member of his party when there was hope of life and rescue would never have occurred to him. But to Black Jack, the lost man was an expendable member of his crew, the sort one could pick up cheaply on any of a dozen pirate worlds. He looked at his remaining men and wondered how *they* would react to his halting the search. Mutiny, he supposed—it had happened to more capable men than he, and for less cause. *What a bother!* he thought. Aloud, he swore. He swore colorfully. He swore a lot.

"Right!" he said when he had exhausted his extensive vocabulary. "I have a plan."

At the sound of the blaster fire, the rest of the party quit milling about the center of the cave, and scurried away from the entrance. All but Sally drew their weapons and tensed for battle. They broke formation when T'Cru appeared and there was no sign of immediate pursuit. T'Cru described for them briefly what he had done, then looked back to the spot where he had finally been forced to drop his captive. He uttered a guttural oath in his mother tongue.

"It was well thought of, T'Cru," said Mosaia, "but perhaps these scoundrels value loyalty less highly than you or I might."

"Maybe they'd cooperate better with T'Cru's plan if they had an inkling the fellow were alive," Mistra suggested. "They may have given him up for lost if they thought you were a cave monster of some sort."

"Yeah," agreed Habie as she took in the amorphous blob sprawled at the cave entrance. "If I'd caught a glimpse of *that*, checking him for signs of life would have dropped pretty far down my to-do list. So would mounting a rescue."

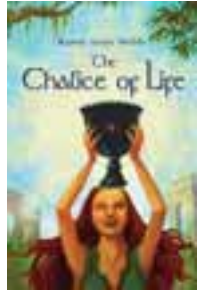
"He's just dazed, I assure you," said T'Cru. He trotted back out to the hall to retrieve the smuggler. Dragging his quarry's limp form into the cave, the Tigroid snuffled at his face. "Well, fainted rather than dazed, I guess, but alive all the same."

"He *looks* dead enough," Deneth commented. In a singularly contemptuous gesture, he nudged the smuggler with the toe of his boot.

"No, just stunned. Look." He swatted the man across the face with no more force than he had used to cuff his littermates (or they him) when they had scuffled as cubs. The man went sailing across the cave, his flight coming to a halt only when he smashed into the far wall.

"Thank you, T'Cru. I'm sure he's much better now."

"Oh, dear." Minor self-reproof here rather than alarm. "I keep



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forgetting how light and fragile you humans are.”

“Skull fracture,” was Torreb’s diagnosis once he had gone skittering after the fellow. His tone provided the mildest of rebukes.

“Oh, come. My nurse used to cuff me harder than that to rebuke me for wandering off on my own when I was just a little cub.”

“It is. See for yourself.” He had cradled the man’s head in his hands to do his diagnostics, and now he held them up as evidence. “Cerebrospinal fluid. It’s leaking from his ear.” He let T’Cru sniff at the fluid till he seemed convinced. “Still, I’ll do what I can for him.” He set to work but was pulled up short by the intrusion of a voice.

“Hey! Hey, you in there!” Deneth, Mosaia, and Habie confirmed for the others that this was Black Jack. “What was that, your *pet* you sent out to put the bite on one of my lads?”

There was some laughter from Jack’s men, but it was quickly drowned out as T’Cru let loose a roar that shook the cavern. “Pet?!” the Tigroid snorted in fury. “How *dare* he?” He actually started to walk out of the cavern, his mind consumed with thoughts of mauling and rending the flesh of the man who had so insulted him. Deneth realized T’Cru’s intent, but a fraction of a second too late for his tackle to be effective. He caught only the Tigroid’s tail, which, of course, put the great beast in an even worse temper. T’Cru snarled but pulled his automatic rake when it registered that this further insult to his dignity was only Deneth’s misdirected effort to get him to think, before he struck, what he might be walking into. T’Cru attempted to groom Deneth to show the bard there were no hard feelings, licking the one spot on his body that had any accumulation of fur—his head. He was forced to stop dead at the look the bard gave him after the first lick: evidently the action had not the connotation among humans that it had among Tigroids!

A glare and a sharp hiss from Mosaia quieted them, and the paladin, feeling it was high time he took the initiative, called out, “Have you only more insults to hurl, or is there some business you have with us?” Squires (knights, for that matter) who heard that tone of voice invariably made themselves scarce, as someone was certainly about to be called to a account in the most unpleasant way imaginable.

“Then you admit that you *are* holed up back there.”

“We are,” he declared, much to the others’ surprise. “In a room lined with magnificent gems.” He moved toward the cave mouth as he spoke and pressed himself against the wall near the entrance.

“Well, well. Isn’t that interesting? You in there with your weapons guarding what we want—the gems—and us out here with our weapons guarding what you want—the way out.”

“We have something else of yours,” Deneth reminded him.

“What? Old Poll? Still alive, is he?”

“He’s fine.” To Torreb, he whispered, “Get back to work, eh? Looks like we may need him after all.”

Torreb did—he had been listening with interest to the exchange to the exclusion of all else since it began—but found, to his surprise, that his skill was no longer needed. He motioned to Mistra to confirm his

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findings. Amazed, Mistra nodded agreement. Simultaneously, the two of them flicked a glance around the moonstone-studded cavern walls, then exchanged a significant look.

"Well, then," shouted Jack, interrupting their thoughts, "our problems are over. You offered that we join forces once, and we overreacted, not knowing how resourceful you were, and you've certainly proved that, beating us to the goods, as it were. I would venture to say that, if we help each other, we could both profit. Why don't you quit lurking back there? Come on out, and we'll have a little chat about things. You'll come to no harm; my lads and I are sheathing our blasters as I speak."

"Raise your hand if you buy that one," Deneth said to no one in particular.

"You'll have to do better than that to lure us out of here," Mosaia growled back at the pirate leader.

Deneth gave him the A-OK sign and complimented, "Very good, mate—I thought you'd go for it."

"My vows include chivalry and courage, Deneth, not complete gullibility."

"What about 'Old Poll' here?" Deneth hollered to Jack. "Wanna see him alive or anything?"

"Nar," Jack spat. "Men foolish enough to get caught by cave animals deserve what they get."

"Good!" Habie whispered to the group in general. "Kill him."

"Well spoken!" applauded the Retributor.

"No!" Mosaia and Mistra said at the same time, though for different reasons. Torreb kept silent, but it was clear he agreed.

"Great," Deneth grouched. "What do you two want to do? Wait till he comes around and blasts us in the back?"

"'Tis dishonorable," Mosaia pontificated, "to attack an enemy fallen and defenseless."

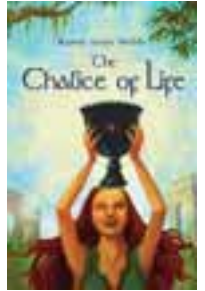
"'Tis dishonorable not to attack—and slay—a creature that reeks so of evil," the sword retorted.

"If that's your objection, Mose, I'll do it," said Habie. "I could even use the Retributor, I'll bet." Her eyes lit with delight at the prospect. She had never handled a blade so marvelous, not even a non-sentient one, and there was an appeal to ordering the actions of a creature that had reproved her and droned on so histrionically about Deneth's shortcomings.

"The young lady may bear me for that purpose."

The others looked perplexed, but Torreb rose, cleared the others away from the body, and said, "All right, Habie. Do it." He winked surreptitiously at Mistra, who nodded her approval. She knew that he had found a way to communicate graphically what the two of them had deduced. The others, except for Deneth, protested, but he hushed them with a look so dark they knew he had to mean business.

Habie assumed that she would have to struggle with the weight of the blade and learned a bare instant too late that accommodation was



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one of its magicks: she nearly fell flat on her back from bracing to counter its imagined mass. Plenty adroit once she understood how the sword worked, she swung it over her head, round and round, to build up momentum. Her objective was the man's neck: surely, a blow from such a weapon, even in her weaker hand, would behead the fellow, and wouldn't that be just the most dramatic gesture! One more arc, and she brought the blade careening down—

And stopped in her tracks. The restraint was so sudden and so forceful that she nearly fell again as the sword rebounded. She had been sideswiped by a runaway vegetable cart in the marketplace once: this effect was as jarring, and it hurt worse. "I *can't*," she gasped. Just to prove her point, she tried again, though with less vigor. "I *can't* do it!"

"Nor I," agreed the sword.

"Attack of conscience?" Deneth needled. The look on his face warred with the tone in his voice: he was clearly as mystified by what had happened as most of the others.

"Thought so," said Torreb. It was as close to smug as they had yet seen him.

"You mean that was an *experiment*?" Alla sputtered, appalled. She had not been in favor of keeping the smuggler alive, but for Torreb to allow the violent charade to continue when the priest had guessed all along that his death could not be accomplished at all was cruel. She hated thinking ill of Torreb, but her limited experience with humans had told her they often lacked perspective on the great Mysteries.

"Ssh, ssh. No. Well, yes. Well, I was *fairly* sure... Look. You can see for yourselves Poll's skull fracture is healed. Now, none of *us* did it. I suggest that the caverns themselves have some sort of healing influence; such an influence would certainly oppose unnecessary violence."

"I knew that," said the Retributor, much too quickly.

"You be quiet," Mosaia fumed as he took it back and partially sheathed it.

The sword whimpered. "But my lord—!"

"Allowing yourself to be used to attack a man unarmed and senseless! I'm appalled."

"But that's what Holy Retributors do: stamp out evil wherever it appears, fight for the right, protect the weak—"

"Oh, hush!"

"I didn't *want* to be a Holy Retributor, you know. I had very little choice in the matter. But when Ereb and Phino and Strepel tell you mmph grk zlook—" His words became incoherent as Mosaia sheathed him completely.

"Thank you!" the others chorused.

"At any rate," Torreb went on, "if you really *want* to parley, you should be quite safe—I doubt the smugglers will be able to attack you any more successfully than Habie did Poll. For that matter, we should be able to slip right by the smugglers with no risk whatsoever."

Sally knelt next to Torreb. "Look," she said. "Is this one of their weapons?" She pulled a blaster from the smuggler's belt. "It is very

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interesting. What does it fire?" She aimed it at a bare spot on the opposite wall of the cavern and put (she thought) the most infinitesimal bit of pressure on the trigger—just as Deneth, Torreb, and Mistra screamed in unison, "Don't!"

An energy bolt shot forth, ricocheting seven or eight times before it dissipated. Swearing from the rest of the group, variously, but in concert.

Torreb tried to wrest the blaster from Sally's grip, but at his perceived attack, her hand had frozen in place on the grip: she would fire no more energy bolts, but neither would she let go till she understood she was not truly under attack. "Don't—!" he began, but she was shrieking "Where's the safety catch? These things are supposed to have a safety catch!"

"Guns may, but blasters don't."

"May I see that?" Mistra snapped. It was not a request. Where the priest and the archaeologist had suddenly deadlocked over control of the gun, they were willing to posture down at the intervention of a third party. Sally's grip on the gun relaxed; so did Torreb's grip on Sally's wrists. Mistra plucked the blaster from Sally's now-limp grasp and purposefully diverted her with an explanation before something else caught the archaeologist's attention and launched her into another potentially homicidal investigation. "This kind doesn't really want one," she went on, turning the blaster over and over and examining it with a practiced eye. "Not in experienced hands, at least. This sort takes a few seconds to recharge after it's been fired."

"What did it fire?" asked Sally, curious now that the shock had passed.

"More to the point," Deneth asked Torreb, "how?"

The priest shrugged. "It was fired without intent to do violence. It would still fit my theory."

"It's a modified laser bolt," Mistra explained to Sally. "Lasers?" she continued, to see if Sally grasped the concept. She did.

"If this is all they're armed with," said Deneth, "even if Torreb's wrong about this place, getting out won't be a problem."

"Oh?" said everyone but Mistra.

"Nope. T'Cru, Habie, how many do you think you saw down here?"

"Maybe twenty," said Habie.

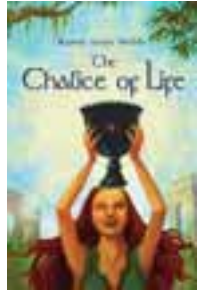
"Certainly fewer than two dozen," agreed T'Cru.

The bard looked as if he were doing a short sum in his head. "Yeah, that still works. See, if they try to kill us while we're down here, they'll be restrained—and we walk out. If Torreb's wrong and they *can* fire, they'll either fire simultaneously, which gives us about five seconds when their weapons are useless, or they'll fire in sequence, so only a few at a time will be a threat. In either case, we can take them in hand-to-hand combat—and we walk out." A few of them looked like they might want to refute this logic, but at that moment Jack's voice broke in on their deliberations.

Down the hall, the prolonged lack of response from their quarry was severely straining the patience of Jack and his men.

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“Think they decided to do in Old Poll, or torture him for information about us?” asked one.

“Not if I read this lot right. If they admit they’ve got ‘im back there, then the beast that took ‘im must be one of them. If even some of the rest are like that knight bloke we had words with, they more likely tried to take him as a hostage or a bargaining chip, in which case they’ll keep ‘im alive just to hedge their bets.”

“So you were bluffing there when you said they could keep him?” said another. “Thought you were lookin’ to inspire a mutiny when you said that, I did.”

“Teach you not to play poker with the boss, eh?” chuckled a third.

But now they exchanged befuddled glances at the sound of blaster fire and screaming.

“Think they’re trying to do themselves in for us, boss?” asked a fourth in an attempt at humor, but he was really wondering if Jack might have misjudged about their quarry keeping Poll alive.

“Nah,” returned Jack, “at least not intentional-like. Bloody fools probably got hold of Poll’s blaster and didn’t know which end was which.”

“So let’s go attack ‘em while they’re all in confusion, eh?” said the second. He actually unholstered his blaster and started up the passage.

“Now, hold on!” Jack clapped a hand on his confederate’s shoulder. “They’re canny enough to set a trap the way we are, aren’t they? Let’s just give ‘em one more chance to hang themselves afore we go striding in there with all guns blazing. Remember, there’s women to be had besides those gems if we play it smooth-like.”

So “Hello?” the questors heard Jack shout. “If your plan is to get us to die of old age, it may just work. I’ve gone grey since the last time you had anything to say to me. Here, have you done old Poll in yet? Are you coming out to parley?”

They looked at one another. “I’ll go,” Mistra offered. To the question in Mosaia’s eyes, she said, “My sword is capable of deflecting blaster fire—in case Deneth is wrong.” She flashed the bard a wry grin.

“A moment, lady,” said Mosaia, still not satisfied that she should take the risk. “My blade is of the same make, is it not? Would it not also deflect blaster fire?”

“Ask it.”

The thought of inviting the blade’s chatter pleased none of them, but, assuming he would have to unsheathe it anyway for combat purposes, he loosed it with a resigned sigh. “Are you able to—?” The words tumbled out. He wanted to glean the information quickly and then tell the blade to shut up.

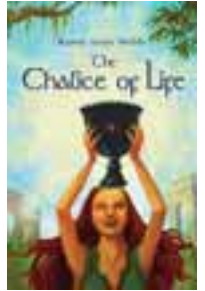
“Of course I can, you big oaf!”

Mosaia rolled his eyes but gave the impression his sense of decorum was stifling a scathing retort. Deneth vocalized the thought Mosaia couldn’t quite frame: “Maybe it can talk them to death.”

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“Come on, then,” Mistra invited.

“I never wanted to be a Holy Retributor, you know,” the sword went on without gracing the bard’s insult with a direct response. Anyone who had missed the interactions after Mosaia had sheathed it would barely have known its discourse had been cut off from the way it resumed its chatter. “Oh, I wanted to be *something* exotic, not *too* exotic—Ereb knows I’m not worthy of being anything powerful and wisely made my powers invocable only when I am held by a member of the royal house of Thalas or his own designee or one so steeped in our culture’s Mysteries he knows the proper rituals. But something just a *little* exotic, something that didn’t keep me ever in pursuit of evil, something where I could have a little *fun*—not *too* much fun, of course, I’m not worthy of real entertainment—a sword good for slaying evil dragons, perhaps. Not *very* big dragons, of course, to have asked for that mission would have seemed prideful, but just the little ones who breathe steam rather than fire or who...”



“Someone’s coming,” one of the smugglers reported. “A real chatterbox. They must really think they’re coming to a parley.”

“Innocent as lambs to the slaughter,” a second guffawed.

“Nar,” snarled Jack. “That I doubt, mate, that I doubt.” He drew his blaster. “Fire only on my say-so, lads.”

They could now hear footsteps above the prattling: two sets, one fairly light. A moment later, the larger of the two men who had tracked them in the ruin above and the woman Jack had noticed throw the spell that brought them here came striding around the corner. The sword—yes, it seemed to be the sword that was yammering—broke off its chatter in mid-sentence, clearly ready to get down to business.

Jack looked them over before he spoke again. A study in opposites they might be, but they shared the bearing of the noble warrior, and the same light—that of one who brooked no nonsense but would treat with the honorable as easily as it would slay the treacherous—burned in their eyes. The sense of quiet menace they projected put him off his game for an entire half-second.

“Well, brought your sorcerous friend with you, I see,” Jack directed to the man. “Going to turn us into newts, are you, dear? Too bad your magic is so likely to backfire down here. Har, har!” He made his laugh intentionally harsh, a stall that would give him a few more precious seconds in which to evaluate the enemy he had not yet fathomed.

Mistra endured the taunt with a world-weary sort of air she had picked up on her travels. Jack was exactly the sort of sentient being she had come to despise, savvy enough to acknowledge the existence of phenomena like the Art Inborn but too self-absorbed to acknowledge the sense of awe, of mystery, of something far greater than oneself that powered it.

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Rather than directly rebutting, she rolled her eyes, then locked them onto Jack's. "It may not be the only thing that backfires," she said, pitching her voice in a quiet way she had developed that she knew sent shivers down people's spines. From the looks on their faces, they heard in her voice portents of their own doom, which pleased her.

"Can we attack them now?" asked the Retributor.

"No," Mosaia hissed.

"But—"

"Curious things have happened," he told the smugglers, breaking in without batting an eyelash, a discourtesy Mistra doubted he would have shown any of the flesh and blood creatures in the party. "The less high-minded of my friends tried to do in your friend when you said you had no use for him. They even used my sword here, and I'm sure you've been able to discern his attitude toward fighting evil wherever he finds it. They found that they could not."

Mistra saw the sword twitch in his hand, as if it felt indignant at being spoken of in the third person—or as if it were contemplating acting on its own initiative. *I wonder if there's a way to cue him to the fact that some of these swords have a limited ability to locomote on their own*, she thought as the tiniest thread of hysteria tickled the back of her mind.

"Too kindhearted, no doubt," Jack sneered.

"No." Mistra was surprised at how placid Mosaia's voice sounded. "'Twas some dweomer of the cavern itself, or so Mistra and our good cleric deemed. Your Poll had fractured his skull; that injury was cured without the services of any of our healers." He pulled himself up to his (considerable) full height and spoke in a tone that said he would brook no further nonsense. "I do not believe that you invited us here in good faith, but I *do* believe you have not the power to hinder our going. We have such gems as our purpose demands and have no quarrel with you. Will you let us pass, or must we test the power of the cave?"

Jack considered briefly. "Let 'em have it, lads!"

Mistra swore as, for the second time that day, she drew the bulk of the attack without completely understanding why. As she brought her sword into play, she noted peripherally that the entire band had fired simultaneously. She felt one shot go whizzing past her head and heard another two sizzle into oblivion on her shield; the rest she countered, thinking *Gee, my reflexes for this sort of thing are better than I remembered!*

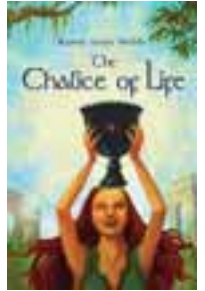
She maintained her battle stance till she was certain all the blasters had gone into recharge mode: now there should be a few seconds during which she and Mosaia could either attack or flee back up the hall. She was in favor of fleeing: Torreb's deductions about the violence-aborting character of this place had proven faulty, and she at least needed a minute to regroup. Thinking he would follow her lead if it were strong enough, she turned to go, but—

"Charge!" came a battle cry that was not Mosaia's. Before she could intervene, the sword lurched forward of its own accord, nearly yanking the paladin off his feet. It had beheaded one of the subordinates and cut a deep gash in Jack's arm on the backswing before Mosaia was able to

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reassert his control over it. Mistra yanked on the back of his hauberk as the blow fell, hoping that that small counterweight would allow him to stem the sword's onrush. It did. She gestured that this was, in her opinion, an excellent time to retreat, and he nodded agreement. They fled back up the hall, accompanied by angry shouts and a volley of laser bolts from the recharged blasters.

"You know," she grumbled to Mosaia as they ran, "if there were less chance of my magic misfiring, I'd just turn the lot of them into rabbits and tell T'Cru that dinner is being served."



"Hide yourselves!" Mosaia shouted as he and Mistra gained the cave. "They're on our heels!"

"Great theory," Mistra panted while she glared at Torreb as the party split and dived behind the outcroppings that flanked the cave entrance on either side.

Deneth, also glaring at the priest, took the captured blaster and attempted to fire before he took cover. He found he could not close his hand on the trigger. He also found that he made an excellent target while he stood there gaping at the blaster as if he could stare it back into functionality. He staggered as an energy bolt shot the blaster from his hand, uttered a little exclamation that sounded like "Eeep!" and lunged for the outcropping on his right. Just in time! The smugglers came tearing into the cave, weapons drawn. The rest of the group had already split, with Torreb, Habie, Alla, and Mosaia on one side and Sally, T'Cru, and Mistra on the other.

"BICTE," Mistra whispered to Deneth as he squeezed in beside her, "only this time it's the theory rather than the plan that's faulty."

"Maybe it's not such a bad theory," Deneth whispered to Mistra. "Maybe you guys just misjudged the spell's area of effect."

"Then if we could get them to stay in here and fight," she reasoned, "we'd be in no danger."

"But once they leave..." He mimed a blaster firing. "Still, it didn't stop T'Cru from swatting Poll there halfway across the room."

"I only meant to show you he was all right," T'Cru snorted indignantly.

"Huh." He puzzled over that a moment, then turned to Sally. "Sal, still got that tranquilizer gun?"

Behind the other outcropping, the other four questors were bemoaning their lack of distance weapons, the one thing that might have succeeded in evening the odds at this juncture.

"As long as we could fire them without violent *Habie what are you doing?!*" Torreb had meant to finish up with "intent," but he saw in alarm that Habie had made several daggers appear as if by magic and was taking aim with one.

"I'll tell the cave I'm just trying to tickle his ribs," she shot back.

Between the two outcroppings, Jack was shouting orders to his men. As he deployed them, two projectiles came whizzing in their direction.

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Habie's dagger, oddly, circled one of the pirates, then boomeranged back so Habie had to duck to avoid being impaled by her own weapon. The other, the red-feathered sleep dart fired by Sally, sank deep into the thigh of one of the pirates. He looked down, looked confused, looked sleepy, and collapsed into a heap.

"Nice shootin', Tex," Mistra complimented.

"Who's Tex?" asked a befuddled Sally.

The next three things happened almost simultaneously. The smugglers noticed their fallen mate. To their faces came the sort of expression that said they had just catalogued their own vulnerability. Jack, deducing that his quarry had more weapons than he had counted on, signaled a guarded retreat. None of them stopped to assist the man Sally had sent off to dreamland.

From where Deneth was sitting, he could see Mosaia pop up from behind the other outcropping and give the four of them a thumbs up. As he did so, blaster fire erupted around them again—clearly, the pirates had not gone far when they had left the cavern! For a long moment, the bolts ricocheted around the cavern walls. Torreb's theory having proved faulty, no one was willing to keep his head up for long enough to follow the track of any one bolt for fear of being struck by the rest. So, although the bolts did rebound in a specific pattern — several of the questors even thought they heard cries and shouts from the pirates on several occasions—at that moment no one noticed what it was.

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When the dust from that volley had settled, Jack called out to them again. His voice was strained—really more strained than any of them thought it should have been in the circumstances—but he was clearly still in command. "Is that the best you can dish out?" he cried. Another hail of bolts brought down the heel of rock above Mistra's head. She jumped as much at the physical threat as at the realization that those bolts had *entered* the cave. "I see I can fire *my* blaster at you easily enough, no matter what story your warriors told us. If you can't attack back, I'd say you're caught like rats in a trap and should surrender."

"To what end?" Mosaia called back, popping up in part so he could shrug to the group on the other side of the cave mouth that his half of the party was out of ideas. "So you can cut us down at your leisure? I fear you will have to fight for that privilege." He ducked out of the way as Jack aimed a shot at him.

Since she was not the target, Mistra braved a peek. Another thought had occurred to her, and she very much wanted to see the path the bolt took when it was aimed with violent intent at a living victim. It glanced off the rock, then ricocheted to the ceiling, to the rear wall, and finally back to the cave mouth, where it again ricocheted so it missed Jack by millimeters. She

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noticed that the rock near the spot where the bolt struck had been disturbed in the last few minutes, as if many blaster bolts had recently impacted the area.

She sat back and thought. She felt she was looking at a mathematics problem whose solution she had been given. What had been left out was a vital bit of information, like what operation was being performed or in what base the problem had been written.

"I can almost hear the gears turning," Sally remarked as she observed Mistra's brow pucker. "Inspired?"

"Just thinking," the sorceress whispered back.

"Ah," she returned sagaciously. "We have a saying around here: 'I think, therefore I stress.'"

Mistra smiled wanly at the reference: apparently, more philosophers than Descartes and more worlds than Terra had developed the concept. "My version of it," she chuckled, "is 'I think, therefore my brain hurts.' Look." She bent over and sketched in the loose earth at her feet. She could not help recalling something an old physics professor of hers had called Cilio's Constant, a constant that effectively changed the universe to fit the equation one had generated (often erroneously) to describe it.

"If everything is the way Torrebb suggested," Sally asked as she tried to make sense of the drawing, "how come the cave isn't protecting us?"

"Maybe it is," Mistra said after a little more sketching. "Look at this. The shot they just fired at Mosaia hit the outcropping, went this way, hit one of the moonstones here, then went back toward the cave mouth, where it ricocheted a final time and nearly grazed Black Jack."

"So?"

"So, even if the moonstones were irregular, the bolt should have gone out this way, or maybe straight down, but certainly not back toward the cave entrance."

"Well, maybe if it were *here*," Deneth pointed out, sketching in a few lines, "and planed like *this*—"

"Hush. I'm making a point." She whapped him lightly on the arm. "And the ground near where the bolt hit is riddled with blaster marks. I wonder if more than just this final shot rebounded oddly and came close to downing the pirates that fired them."

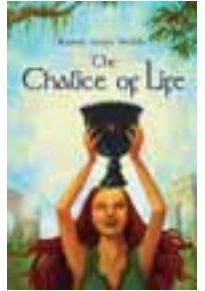
"Or connected with their targets," T'Cru remarked. "Did you not note the strain in their captain's voice just now? And the scent of fear has become almost overwhelming in the last minute."

"It's possible the *full* effect of the spell includes not only suppressing violent acts within the cavern but reflecting an attack back on someone who attacks from outside."

"Then why isn't it just killing the smugglers as they fire?"

"I think it may be trying to, but the distance the blaster shots are traveling as they ricochet around the cave are just diminishing their force and accuracy."

"I see your point," said Deneth. "But what good does it do us? What do we do, go out there and ask them please to shoot directly at the moonstones as if they want to kill them?"



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“Don’t be bizarre.” She exchanged a fractured grin with him, then took a rock and lobbed it over the outcropping. A blaster shot disintegrated it before it hit the ground. An instant later, they heard an aborted shriek from one of the pirates. “See? They’ll fire at anything that moves. All we need to do is to invite their blaster fire at closer range and have the moonstones ready to deflect that fire back to them, after which we simply walk out of here.”

“But they’re so small!” Sally protested.

“Some of the larger ones—”

“Surely you can’t mean for us to carry them before us like tiny shields!” protested T’Cru.

“Wait a bit,” Deneth said slowly. “What if we had a medium to embed them in?” His focus sharpened as the idea took shape. “I wonder...” He pulled his cloak from his pack.

T’Cru, catching his drift, pawed a moonstone loose from the wall and nosed it toward the bard. “As long as Lord Clear Water can keep them talking for a few more minutes,” he postulated, “we may find a way to put Deneth’s plan into effect. Has either of you noticed in your packs something that would affix them?”

“You mean a needle and thread, or some fabric glue?” Sally asked brightly. “Those are standard equipment on a dig! Always tearing something when you scramble through an excavation site.” She produced both.

“OK,” said Mistra, “let’s start unloading those gems, or prying them loose from the wall if you folks didn’t collect enough.”

“Let’s hope Mosaia gets my message to keep them talking,” said Deneth. “How quickly can we do this?”

“Leave that to me.”

“This isn’t fair,” Habie complained, echoing Sally’s thought. “If you’re right, Torreb, about how healing and nonviolent this place is, why isn’t it protecting us?”

“Perhaps because we haven’t as yet fathomed its complete mystery,” Alla replied. “At least no one’s actually been hurt.”

“What do you suppose *that* means?” Mosaia asked the others as a loud whistle drew his attention to the outcropping opposite.

“What’s what mean?” asked Torreb.

Mosaia nodded toward the other outcropping. Looking like a target in a shooting gallery, Deneth was popping up every few seconds gesturing alternately as if he were pulling taffy one time and as if he were rolling his arms around the inside of a horizontal cylinder the next. Mosaia wondered if the strain of the adventure had finally taken its toll.

Alla watched through a few of these cycles before her face lit. “I would say,” she said with a bemused laugh, “that they’ve hit on something and need us to draw things out a little. That’s a lengthening or a ‘keep it rolling’ gesture if ever I saw one.”

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It had a sort of twisted logic, and it was better than anything the four of them could come up with. They quickly put their heads together and devised a plan. Habie, by far the most imaginative of the four, began assigning parts to them as if she were directing a play. To Torreb's, "And what do you want *me* to do, pray at them?" she said, seriously, "Yes."

Shortly, Black Jack and his crew as well as the other members of the party heard Torreb's voice ring out in a highly-cadenced chant. Out in the passage, the smugglers looked at one another in puzzled disbelief, as if to say, "What *now*?" Across the cavern, Mistra and Deneth exchanged both a glance and a cocked eyebrow: both knew just enough Old High Thalybdenocian to realize what the priest was chanting was a blend of the ancient ceremonial tongue, a few archaic but very colorful profanities, and complete gibberish.

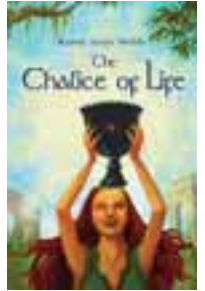
"I didn't know he had it in him," Deneth chuckled quietly.

Presently, Habie's voice eclipsed Torreb's as the priest feathered off into a quiet drone. "The fit has come upon my mistress!" she intoned at her histrionic best. "My master chants the Ritual of Opening that prepares the way for the Goddess to set her hand on my mistress' shoulder! Listen, you who would have your fates foretold!" Her sharp ears picked up sounds in the passage that said the smugglers were creeping forward; her empathic sense told them they were being drawn in in spite of themselves.

Now Alla took over. As was true of Torreb, the others had not suspected she had it in her to dissemble, or to dissemble with such panache. "You who follow the one whose heart is as black as his name," she began. "Know that your doom has raised its hand to knock upon your door: soon it will lift the latch, and there will be no escape. I speak first to that one of you who in youth was called by the name of his near kin, whose kin spurned and castigated him so his life was one of grievous affliction..."

There are few smugglers traversing the space lanes who are not in some way superstitious; fewer still like to admit the extent to which their superstitions hold them in thrall. The questors like T'Cru who had keen hearing or like Habie and Mistra who could sense feelings recognized the effect Alla's prophesying was having. Periodically, one of the smugglers would recognize himself in one of her enigmatic descriptions and say, "That's me! That's *me*!" One or two of them emitted a sob at a description of a childhood trauma he had endured. Although the *Aranyaka* was merely making use of intelligent guesswork, several decided Alla's ability to "identify" incidents in their past meant her suggestion that doom was about to strike had some validity and broached the subject of departure. Jack and a varying number of the rest shouted them down. The result of all this was that the smugglers' attack during Alla's performance was limited to the occasional potshot; they issued no further ultimatum, nor did they seek to storm the cavern *en masse*.

"We left out one critical detail," Mistra said as they set the last few stones. She had kept her magical manipulations to a minimum. Her chief



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interventions had been to multiply the volume of glue Sally carried tenfold, then to speed up its drying time by several orders of magnitude. As time grew short, however, she risked a simple spell that would make them all move a little faster. What, she figured, did they have to lose at that point?

Working together, they had smeared glue over the entire cloak, then tossed handfuls of moonstones at it, spreading them out evenly as the cloak became more and more encrusted. Deneth had made a face initially at the sticky mess, but he looked on with approval as Mistra's spell of hastening ran its course and left him with an attractive, gem-studded cloak.

"What one thing?" asked T'Cru.

"Who's going to wear the silly thing? It'll be suicide if I'm wrong about the effect of the gemstones."

"I reckoned it would be me," Deneth said with conviction. To the three curious, slightly alarmed looks he got, he said simply, "Well, it *is* my cloak," as if such a rationale should have been as clear and evident as the sun.

Mistra opened her mouth, but very little sound came out. She knew her eyes betrayed fear for his life.

"Well, you're going to resurrect me if I get killed, right?" he reasoned. "You tell Torreb if the worst happens, I don't want to hear anything about how my soul was ready to make the journey into the Great Beyond and so he couldn't ethically bring me back. I *want* to come back. I want to finish this, OK?" Something in his tone said that if he stopped talking long enough to think, nerves would conquer him, but his three friends thought better of bringing this to his attention.

When they had finished, he donned the cloak, flourished it a few times to test its weight, popped up a final time to give the other half of the party a "cut the chitchat" sign—and prepared to step into what he fully expected would become the line of the smugglers' fire. In what the others supposed was a concession to his own bravado, he turned back at the last instant and pulled Mistra into an elaborate stage embrace, complete with very thorough kiss. She offered him absolutely no resistance.

Just as Jack was beginning to rumble about renewing the attack in earnest, the other four adventurers saw Deneth give the "cut" signal. Mosaia had been toying with the best entree he could give his friends for the enactment of their plan, and now he gave it: he allowed that the adventurers would consider surrender if they could first be permitted to inform the other half of their party of their plan. To this Jack assented, though grudgingly. His suspicion was that this was really the precursor to a final desperate strike, but, if they were sincere, at least it would mean bringing this annoying impasse to a quick end.

"This cave has been our undoing, my friends," Mosaia called to them. "What say you to a surrender and a quick end?"

"I say forget it!" came Deneth's emphatic reply. He stepped into the breach between the two outcroppings. "I have a score to settle with these clowns, cavern or no. If you want me, come and get me!"

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Jack knew some spell or effect had come into play here, and that his failure to grasp how it operated had now cost him a third of his men. On the other hand, he was not one to waste an opportunity when it jumped into his lap. He took the bait, yelling, "At 'im, lads!"

As quickly as Jack's men fell to the attack, Deneth was quicker. He fanned the cape an instant before the dozen-odd blaster bolts reached him. For a moment, the commotion of mundane blaster fire raining on magical stone deafened friend and foe alike. Light bombarded him, glanced off him, rebounded back, cascaded across him. As it ricocheted from moonstone to moonstone, it waxed in power till each gem glowed like a tiny sun. The adventurers, who were trying to keep their eyes fixed on the scene till it became clear if and how they should follow up the ruse with more decisive action, were forced to turn away by the sheer resplendence of the light that suddenly illumined their friend. It might embrace Deneth like an argus of sanctity, but to stare at in unaided while it waxed in brilliance was to go blind!

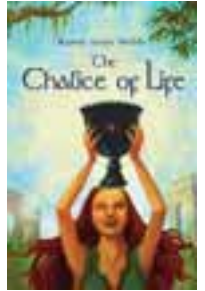
When any of them could again bear to look, they forgot all about observing to see if and how they should act. Mistra and Mosaia leapt almost simultaneously over the outcropping, swords drawn (and, in the Retributor's case, chanting war cries); T'Cru and Habie joined them in a violent rush to bear down on the pirates. Alla screamed, as did Sally. Although the archaeologist was in on the secret and had helped to orchestrate it, she had been prepared for neither the ferocity of the pirates' attack nor its aftermath. An instant later, Alla was shape-shifting and careening after the pirates as well. Torreb alone rushed to Deneth's aid, but he drew his mace even as he scrambled to help his fallen friend.

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Mistra berated herself for ever having thought the ploy would work even as she strode to the attack. She had forced herself to look faster than the rest when the light around Deneth waned to the point they could bear it without being blinded, so she had seen what the rest had missed. The argus had enfolded Deneth a moment longer, bearing him up when he would have fallen. Then it had dissipated, and he had crumbled.

She had to blink several times as tears threatened to cloud her vision. Then several more times as she forced her brain to come to terms with what her eyes were taking in. The pirates, rather than attacking, were lying inert on the tunnel floor. *That* much of their plan had worked. Hope igniting in her heart, she turned back to see if she had misinterpreted Deneth's collapse. She felt like a salmon trying to swim upstream for a moment as she tried to breach the veritable wall formed by her companions. All save Torreb and Deneth were doing one of two things: still rushing to the attack or standing immobile regarding the pile of pirate bodies and trying to make sense of why they were lying there rather than attacking. Finally forcing her way back through, she ran, dropped down beside the Torreb to see if there was anything she could do to help, berated herself some more.

But even as she took one of Deneth's hands in her own and stroked his



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brow, he stirred. He blinked a bit, took in both her and Torreb, and then murmured something so quiet they both had to lean in to hear it. Torreb burst out laughing immediately; Mistra, never moving away, opened her mouth to ask how he could make jokes at a time like this, then felt a wave of heat take her as she met his eyes. This time when he pulled her into his embrace, she not only offered no resistance, she responded with zeal!

“What did he say?” Mosaia asked Torreb as the rest jogged back into the cavern to see how Deneth fared.

“He said to get the license plate, he wants to sue the driver,” the priest responded, still chuckling. “He was never really harmed, just overcome by the impact of all those laser bolts striking at once.”

The two men put down their eagerness to ask not only what the bard and his friends had done but what their reasoning had been in favor of averting their eyes as the amorous display ran its course. Mistra finally pulled away and offered Deneth a hand to help him up. Her eyes had rounded; both a rosy glow and a silly smile had come to her face. The two men opened their mouths to speak again but got no farther than “So what did you—?” before Deneth had picked Mistra up in a rib-crusher of a hug. He swung her around and again closed his mouth firmly over hers. Torreb and Mosaia exchanged a humorously long-suffering glance. They could hardly resent the display, though. Something about Deneth’s manner said he hadn’t completely realized he had survived till he stood on his own two feet and that he had to take Mistra in his arms again just to savor the sensation in the full knowledge that he lived. This second kiss ran its course quickly, though, after which he freed one arm to scratch T’Cru behind the ears and gave Sally a quick peck on the cheek. As if they saw those two gestures of camaraderie as signaling his willingness to talk, the rest let loose a barrage of questions.

“By the Balance of Ereb!” Torreb exclaimed. “Was this *your* doing?” He touched the cloak with reverent hands.

“Yup,” Deneth responded gleefully. “Weren’t we great?”

“I confess,” Mosaia said, clapping Deneth on the back and working around Mistra to catch him in a quick embrace, “I am ready to concede your greatness, but at what? What sort of magic was this?” He, too, fingered the cloak in wonder.

“Just what you said about the caves,” Sally explained. “I said it wasn’t fair that they should prohibit violent acts but not protect anyone, and Mistra noticed that one of the moonstones deflected the blaster fire strangely—toward the smugglers instead of at a normal reflective angle. So we decided maybe that’s what the gems do: not just prohibit attacks in the cave but turn them back on their perpetrators. And she thought we could just carry them with us and hope we could catch the laser bolts on them, but Deneth suggested we embed lots of them in his cloak so we emptied out our packs and glued and glued and glued, and here we are.” Back to the vocal blur in her state of excitement, but neither Mistra nor the others

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begrudded her her state of exhilaration.

"A nice piece of work," Mosaia said of the cloak. "So it's not really magical at all, save for the stones themselves?" He looked to Mistra in what she interpreted as a request for confirmation.

Mistra felt as if she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar: he had cautioned her earlier about her use of magic in this place. "I sped things up—just a bit. That's all. But if I hadn't—"

"Ssh, ssh." He held up a conciliatory hand and flashed her a gallant smile. "I make no accusations, Princess. I merely seek to learn how such things are accomplished." He waited till she let a tiny smile fight its way through her defiance, then turned to Deneth. "Well, Deneth, a nice piece of finery you have procured for yourself for your pains, and our sincere thanks. 'Twas a brave act, for all you believed your theory to be correct."

Deneth cast his eyes downward, suddenly drained of bravado, and muttered something about it not being anything. Mistra got the sense that he found the paladin's personality a bit overwhelming, and that to have it directed at him, even to give praise, made him feel thoroughly outclassed.

"It *was* something," Alla corrected. "Magic notwithstanding, it was a very brave gesture on your part, Deneth. You didn't *know* it would work."

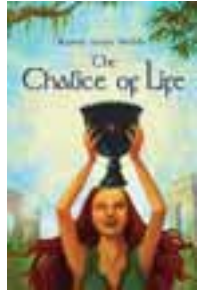
"I think you were wonderful," Habie chimed in. "All of you, I mean," she added, though she had obviously directed the remark at Deneth.

As Habie led the rest in a foray to check the pirates for plunder, Mistra took Deneth's hand and looked into his eyes. It had finally registered that his palms were sweating; only in noticing the way his color had improved was she coming to realize how much he had paled.

"I think I've come up with another acronym for us," said Deneth as he let Mistra ply him with their 'medicinal' brandy. "AGITATE, for things that are the opposite of BICTE." To their expectant looks, he explained, "As Good In Theory As 'Twas in Execution. You have to fudge it a bit, but it works." And the rest agreed it was both an apt term and a clever use of the language.

Torreb, meanwhile, had concluded that Black Jack and his lot were indeed beyond any priest's ability to help. It called to mind his other charge, forgotten in the frenzy of the moment. He smacked his head with one hand and called himself several uncomplimentary names before he darted across the cave to find Poll coming around. Sally had taken charge: she had re-sedated the pirate she had tranquilized earlier and now, with Alla's help, was repositioning Poll with the intention of injecting a third tranquilizer dart into his heavily padded rump. Sally looked to Torreb for confirmation. He nodded his approval and stood looking on. As he did so, his eyes were distracted by the glitter of a small pile of moonstones lying where Poll's head had just been. He puzzled over this a moment—certainly no moonstones had been lying there when T'Cru's swat had sent the smuggler flying across the room.

"Mistra?" he called. "Has your gadget finished its analysis for the stuff in the channels in this room yet?"



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An oath from the sorceress berating herself for not having checked earlier. “Looks like it finished up while we were otherwise engaged,” she said, appearing from behind the outcropping with the readout in her hand. “Here you go. It’s cerebrospinal fluid.”

Torreb turned to Sally. “My dear, you were on the right track all along. I think I know now how to get the rubies we need.” He took a small utility knife from his pack, made a small slit in one finger (to gasps of shock and curiosity) and allowed the blood to drip onto the earth at his feet.

Other than this generating a sense of expectancy, nothing happened.

“Gee, Torreb,” said Habie. “You’ve discovered blood.”

“More mysteries?” Alla asked in response to his disappointed look.

“I guess!” he replied. “I don’t get it. How...?” Even as he framed the question, his eyes strayed to the channels above the gem line. A different color for every room, a different substance for every room, a different—

“Of course!” he burst out with no warning. “That’s why each room has only one sort of gem!” He got seven confused stares. “Don’t you see? The soil of each room must be constructed or programmed or ensorcelled or something to admit and react with only one kind of fluid.”

“So the earth itself serves as a semi-permeable membrane,” Mistra said with a thoughtful frown and a nod.

“Or a semi-semi-semi-semi-semi-permeable membrane,” corrected Sally, catching on. “I guess I wasn’t too far off with that one guess after all.”

“Right,” said Torreb. “No one siphons anything off. You had the right idea about that, too, Sally, though you wrote it off as silly. It’s simply that, when the right fluid gets to the right room, it passes through the channels, then reacts to form the sort of gems we found in each room. We must go back to the ruby cavern. My idea was sound, but we have to be in the right cavern for the blood to turn into rubies. Come on!”

Torreb took Sally and Alla by the hand and dragged them along with him. Habie tagged along uninvited “just to see what happens,” although she wanted to be on hand to run for help in case Torreb had gone completely around the bend. The others learned later that, once Torreb’s theory had been borne out, she had made a deep cut in her own arm with the thought of creating her fortune—only to have the healing powers of the cavern seal the wound before half a dozen rubies had shimmered into existence. Not one to let disappointment keep her down for long, she decided to keep them as mementoes of the adventure: a creation of her own flesh and blood, although they were large and perfect enough to be quite valuable.

Deneth recovered with no more than a few sips of brandy and a brief rest. Although he had appreciated Mistra’s not disclosing his attack of nerves to the others, he now admitted his misgivings about the whole affair freely. He had meant it in part to deflect the quantity of praise still being heaped on him but found that it had the opposite effect. Like Mistra, the others thought even more of him.

“After all,” Mosaia mused from the spot where he had seated himself

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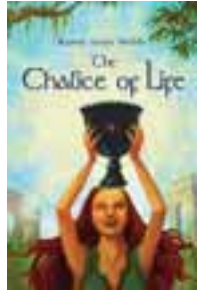
KAREN ANNE WEBB

at Deneth's head, "it is not truly brave to face that which stirs no fear in your heart. The true act of courage is the one we perform when fear bids us turn and run."

He grunted. "Those clowns would have made mincemeat of us if they'd won through. It was worth a try, as we had nothing to lose. Felt like being tagged by a hurricane, though!" Looking up, he surprised a look of infinite tenderness in Mistra's eyes.

Torreb returned presently with his small entourage and a large handful of rubies. "It worked!" exclaimed a still mystified Sally. "I don't believe it worked, but it did! I'm so sorry I ever called any of this silly. Can you all ever forgive me?"

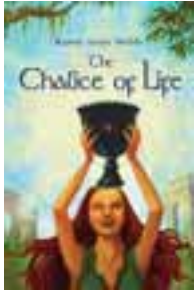
"No offense was ever taken, lady," said Mosaia, speaking for all of them. "There is nothing to forgive." He made a show of rising. "And now to determine if the way out is the same as the way in."



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CHAPTER 10



Applications

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"If for company you find a wise and prudent friend who leads a good life, you should, overcoming all impediments, keep his company joyously and mindfully."

—The Book of Wisdom

The portal back to the wine cellar was still open; as the adventurers crossed it, they had no sense that time was once more slipping around them. They now carried with them a supply of each gem, the chalice, and Mistra's data about which fluid went with which gem. They were discussing exactly how they might get themselves back to the surface when they thrust open the door to the inn and found their problem solved for them—but not in a way any of them had expected! Outside the inn stood not the undercity but their campsite. No one moved for a moment except to rub an eye or pinch a bit of exposed flesh to reassure himself that this was not a dream.

Mistra was the first to recover from the state of bemusement. She shrugged. "It makes as much sense as anything else we've seen today," she decided.

"I suppose," Deneth agreed, although he was far from convinced. "Still..." He restrained Mistra while tapping the side of his nose, then backtracked to the bar and grabbed a bottle of wine. Stepping back to the threshold, he lobbed it across. It somersaulted and landed in a cloud of ash in the embers of their fire.

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"I would say," T'Cru pronounced, "that it still looks like a bottle of wine. Of course, I'm no expert." He flashed them a wry feline smile.

They piled through the door in a tight cluster, weapons still to the ready. When the vista neither exploded nor quaked nor faded to black around them, they postured down. A few sighs of relief gave way to frank laughter as they realized they had come through the first leg of their adventure whole and relatively unscathed. They took in the scene around them and laughed some more at the absurdity of it all. Before them lay their campsite; around it lay the hills, the ruins, the mundane outdoor world of planet Astra. But from the hill behind their campsite opened the anomalous door through which they could still see the common room of the inn.

"You know," Mistra remarked to Mosaia as the others dropped their packs, "the logic of this place would dictate that our access to the underground should end now that we've accomplished our task." She frowned a bit at the open door as if its presence offended her sense of reason.

"Perhaps we have something left to do," he replied thoughtfully.

"Oh?"

"I think I'm having an attack of conscience."

"Ah." She nodded sagaciously. "Your Law would dictate that the pirates got what they deserved."

"The ones who died cleanly, yes." His eyes held a degree of amiable mischief. "But your Ethic would suggest that, for those who survived, a living entombment is neither just nor compassionate."

"And living entombment is what it will be if they can't find their way back out," she agreed.

He grinned. "I think perhaps the magic of the Hamani and the chalice is siding with your Ethic."

As Mistra smiled in amusement at his appraisal—interesting, she thought, that a creature of Law like Mosaia would reach that particular conclusion!—the paladin strode off. He conscripted Deneth and Torreb and dived back through the door to retrieve the two unconscious pirates.

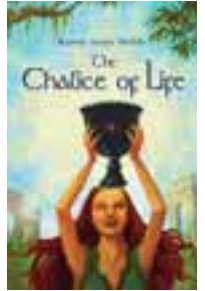
"Good thing they took it on themselves to act," Habie commented uncharitably.

"And why is that?" asked Mistra.

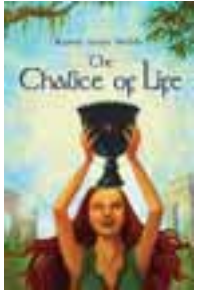
"I'd have said it was poetic justice that those goons who were willing to kill for the gems *should* spend the rest of their natural lives in company with them. But what do I know?"

"I'd have said you know quite a lot." She smiled and ruffled the fur between Habie's ears. The girl's sour mood dissipated, and she smiled back.

As the men disappeared, Sally began to wax effusive. "What a find!" she enthused. Something of her bird-like aspect resurfaced as she latched onto first one questor then the next in her eagerness to decompress by recounting each step of their journey. Most of her sentences began with "Did you see how...?" or "Do you remember...?" till she reached her apotheosis. "Do you know what this could mean to the expedition? To the university? To *me*?" She gasped in sudden realization. "We need to prop the door open before the men come back through. Hurry! Get some rocks! Get



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some logs! Get *anything!*” She cast about for an object with which she could prop the door and tried with increasing desperation to spur the others to help. The four remaining questors exchanged a look. Mistra twice tried to caution her; three times, Alla tried to explain the likely futility of such an action. Habie and T’Cru, each in his own way, tried to calm her as she began to scurry about the dell grabbing rocks and fallen wood and casting them before the open door. But each time one of them opened his mouth, she cut him off with a plea for aid or an assertion that he wasn’t grasping the urgency of the matter. As the men returned bearing the two unconscious pirates, she only prattled the more frantically.

And now, what the others had been trying to warn her about did, in fact, come to pass. The instant the men emerged from the inn, the door swung shut as if the pile of rocks and wood and other debris had simply phased out of existence. There was a sense of finality to the *bang!* that issued from it as it slammed. Slowly it faded till, in the end, it had become just another nondescript part of the embankment. The entire process had taken less than a minute.

“No!” Sally shrieked. In a dazzling display of illogic and futility, she threw herself against the embankment, pounding and gouging the spot where the door had been. She repeated “No” over and over till finally, spent from the fit of exertion, she wobbled unsteadily and burst into tears. Mosaia did no more than touch her shoulder, and she collapsed, sobbing convulsively, into his arms. “It’s not fair,” was the first thing other than “No” that she managed to choke out.

Mistra had removed the communications device from Poll’s belt and begun fiddling with it, but now she looked up from her work. “Not fair?” she exclaimed in a mild rebuke. “Sally, for the love of Cilio! How can you say that? What greater adventure could an archaeologist ever have than the one you just went through? Think of all you became a part of: the undercity, the time slips, the mine, the discovery of the way the gems were made. You *saw* exactly what happened to the people you’ve dedicated your life to studying—how they rose, how they fell, how they—”

“But I can’t get back,” she wailed miserably. “No one will believe me if I can’t get back and take them with me and show them.”

“You’d find nothing, I fancy,” Torreb conjectured as Mistra returned to her fiddling, “even if you were able to *get* back.” He held the chalice so its black surface gleamed and the gems caught the fire of the westering sun. Sally’s complete deflation allowed him to get out the explanation the others had tried and failed to communicate. “I think we were allowed to go there just to find this. Now that we have what we need to help the dragons, I reckon we won’t get back in, even if we try, even if we redo every single thing that got us there in exactly the same sequence.”

“Well, can’t we just *try?*”

He sighed. “I’m sorry, Sally. I have an ill creature to care for, and many of his race after him. That must come first.”

Sally hung her head, chastened. “Your dragon—I’d quite forgotten. Of course you must see to him immediately.” Then, “Oh!” she gasped. The men had dropped the two pirates to one side of the camp circle. Apparently,

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Mistra's fiddling had paid off, for now the two bodies blurred to indistinction. Seconds later, a golden argus surrounded them. Seconds after *that*, both argus and pirates vanished.

"Guess I got it right," Mistra said with a small smile of satisfaction. "With a lost crew and the story those two will tell their shipmates, I think your team—the whole site, really—will be safe from them for a bit."

Sally shook her head. "Magic and technology so advanced it *looks* like magic—I'll just never get used to it."

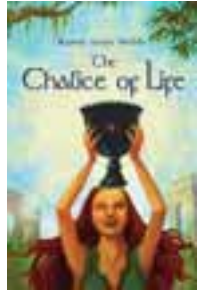
Habie, in a sudden show of sympathy, took her hand. "Then we better give you some more chances! Come with us, why dontcha?"

"What? Where?"

"To wherever these dragons that we've got to cure live."

"Me? Oh! Oh, no, I—"

"Tsk. Come on." She smiled up at the archaeologist. She never understood exactly what Sally saw in her smile, but whatever it was did the trick. So Sally found herself on yet another leg of the oddest adventure she had ever experienced.



The dragon was right where they had left it. Although it showed no other sign of improvement, it was able to open an eye and greet them without the help of an intermediary. At the sight of the chalice and the gems, its expression changed to what may have been a beatific smile.

"You have done well," it croaked.

"We'll see *how* well in a moment," Torreb replied. He laid out one of each sort of gem in a line before the dragon. "We have yet to put all of the elements together. Which of these do you need? Can you tell?"

The dragon looked. Then, with a titanic effort, it moved its claw to point to the ruby. A collective sigh of relief from the company at this: the dragon not only knew which Elixir it needed but had also indicated the stone whose humour was among the easiest to collect.

Torreb set to work immediately, but the dragon lay still. That effort had cost it its last bit of strength.

"We must keep it stimulated until Torreb has finished," Alla said matter-of-factly. "Here, help me. Pat its claws, rub its skin, move its wings around..."

"Mistra," Deneth asked suddenly as they set to work, "do you still have that brandy you were going to consign to Torreb's first aid kit? It would be worth a try."

"Of course!" she replied, smacking her brow. She made a dive for her pack. When she pulled out the brandy, however, it struck her that the bottle contained pitifully little fluid compared to the size of the creature they were trying to help. She looked back and forth between bottle and dragon twice in a show of denial before she saw reason. The dragon was not going to shrink, and the brandy was not going to augment either its quantity or its alcohol content on its own.

She bent her head and gave the Ether a little tweak. Then, with the

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help of Mosaia and T'Cru, she pried the creature's great maw open and forced some of the liquor down its throat. It gagged just a little before it roused enough to take a few swallows. Swallow became long draught. It began to stir. One long draught became two. Its ragged breathing began to sound more like that of a creature in a profound sleep than one that lay at death's door. It was some time before anyone remarked that, although the dragon swallowed and swallowed, the bottle never seemed to empty.

Meanwhile, Torreb had set to work in a corner of the chamber. He took three rubies the size of his fist and placed them in the chalice, then snicked his finger and milked it till the blood flowed freely. It struck him then that even knowing how the chalice interacted with the gems and bodily humours was not the same as having a recipe or a formula that would guarantee success! Was the effect a function of how many gems or how much fluid, or a proportion based on a certain quantity of finished elixir compared to the mass of the target creature, or would the very magic of the chalice and the gems render all such measures meaningless?

But as the first few drops of blood fell on the rubies, he found that the magic of the chalice and the gems was solving his dilemma for him. The jewels dissolved into a bubbling, viscous mixture that exuded a fragrance like cherry blossoms. What was more, the chalice was filling as if from an unseen well: the volume of the mixture when it stopped bubbling was easily twice that of the rubies and blood together. *Magic, indeed!* he thought.

He showed the freshly made elixir to the others, who "ooh"ed and "aah"ed in appreciation. Encouraged by their nods, he poured a few drops of the fluid directly on the dragon's tongue, then had them help him dab small amounts of it on the green patches on the dragon's skin. He made to put more of the fluid on the dragon's tongue but held off when it spoke. Its voice was husky but definitely stronger. "No, it is enough. The potions made from the gems taken from the mines of the Hamani are potent, and I must bid you save the precious medicine for the rest of my people."

"But you still don't look well," Torreb protested.

"Give me time. Long have I been ill, and those tiny drops will take some time to traverse my huge body. But already I feel the vigor of new life coursing through me."

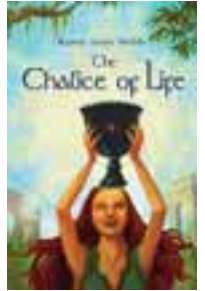
They made their camp in the same spot. Sally, fearing that the rest of her expedition might be worried at her absence, gratefully accepted a torch and departed for her own camp. She refused the offer of an escort but promised to skirt the city as the questors had done the night before to avoid becoming ensnared in any more strange traps. She promised to return the next morning to see how the dragon was faring.

"And make sure you check with your friends to see if we've really only been gone since this morning," called Habie, "'coz I still don't believe it!"

They again took it in turn to watch over the great beast. More precisely, Torreb stayed up all night, and the others took it in turn to keep him company. The dragon exchanged pleasantries with them for the first

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hour or so of their vigil, asking their names and deeds and those of their forebears (as was polite among its own kind) but fell after a time into a heavy sleep. Although it continued to breathe easily, its sleep became deeper and deeper as the night wore on.



Torreb grew increasingly uneasy as the dragon's state of sleep deepened. In fact, he paced so much that the others, upon joining him, were surprised to find that he had not worn a groove worn in the cavern floor. He had tended few comatose patients, none of them of beast-kind, but he feared that the dragon had at some time during the night crossed back over that line from sleep to stupor. Finally, near dawn, he found himself debating whether or not to try another mindlink. When Alla joined him for the last watch, he opened his heart to her.

"Be patient, my friend," was her counsel. "It is only a sleep of healing such as many sentient beasts undergo. Wait for the dawn and be of good hope."

Under her calming influence, he settled down. He even let her talk him into taking a short nap on the condition that she promised to wake him at the first sign of change. Alla and Alla alone could have elicited from him this degree of trust on such short acquaintance, he thought. As he settled down, he wondered at this, but ascribed it to the fact that she had spent many lives of men tending the wounded creatures of Minissa. Surely this case differed only in degree (or size) rather than in substance from the thousands she must have seen through to completion. So he dropped off. Visions of gems danced through his dreams, as did the chalice, the dragon, and the smugglers. He was just managing to lure all of the smugglers into the chalice so he could sprinkle moonstone dust on them and turn them into thousands of itty-bitty Tuhl clones when the sound of stone scraping on stone roused him.

He pulled himself to full consciousness and blinked the three times it took his eyes to adjust, finally forcing his eyelids to stay open by a supreme effort of will. Light—*Light*?! he thought—streamed in the cave entrance. Alla was nowhere to be seen—and neither was the dragon!

"Oh, no," he groaned at his perceived dereliction of duty. He bolted down the hall to the entrance. As he ran, he surprised in himself feelings that were more curious and expectant than truly alarmed, but those feelings did nothing to slow his pace. He careened out the cave mouth, narrowly avoiding Alla, who was standing just outside. She was shading her eyes with one hand. He thought she must be watching something high in the sky, but the breaking light made it difficult for him to see what. All he could make out was a small speck circling high above them.

"Birdwatching, are you?" he accused. "You were supposed to wake me! Where's my dragon?"

"He is not *your* dragon any more than Ereb is *your* god," she answered placidly. She did not move or look at him, but the ghost of a smile played about her lips.

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The most glittering repartee he could manage was “Huh?” Something about the way she had replied told him that was the best—the *only*—answer he was going to get. Unless, perhaps, she was directing him with her body language to her answer.

Slowly, he turned his eyes to the small speck. He realized that what he had taken to be a bird of prey was something far larger circling at a tremendous height. As he watched, it began to spiral in. Suddenly, some part of the periphery of his face expanded: either his brows rose, or his jaw dropped, or both. Whatever it was, the middle part of his face suddenly felt twice as large as it had a moment ago.

The circling speck was the dragon!

He must have made some sort of squeal of acknowledgment, for Alla turned to him and said, “Yes, Torreb. The elixir worked. He woke while you were still sleeping and said he absolutely must feel the morning air on his face and the wind carrying him aloft. How could I restrain him? And how could I wake you? Your sleep was well-deserved after such efforts.” Her eyes shone, and he understood from something in her face that this was, for her, high praise. He also somehow understood that few *Aranyaka* (and no humans) had heard such words spill from her lips.

“Hail, Torreb, son of Eroch, finest of healers!” the dragon called in a rich, definitely masculine voice as he swooped by them. He lighted gracefully on the rock ledge above their campsite, let out a roar of exhilaration, and flapped his wings a few more times for no more reason than joy in their motion. His skin shone like red gold in the light of the new day. He had, Torreb thought, meant the roar only to alert the small company to the fact that life was fine and that it was much too delightful a morning for them still to be curled in their sleeping rolls. He had not, Torreb also surmised, reckoned on the effect the sight of a huge, ancient dragon pulsing with the full vigor of youth would have, looming above them and posed dramatically against the rising sun as it was. The priest was forced to laugh as he watched his comrades’ reactions. A mad scramble ensued as they geared up to meet the threat: hands flew to weapons, and he could almost hear the psionic whisper that said the spellcasters were getting ready to shape the Ether. And then, after the flurry of activity, they simply froze in place in confusion over why the dragon wasn’t attacking. Just as Torreb was concluding it was up to him to assure them there was no danger, he heard Habie cry out, the first of them to recover in her youthful exuberance and inexperience of monsters (other than fellow Lemurians).

“Look!” she cheered. “It’s our dragon! He’s all better!” She clapped her hands gleefully and dashed up the steep incline to greet the creature.

The rest broke formation, grumbling as they did so. There is little that puts one out of temper like being yanked forcibly from a deep sleep by a threat to life and limb only to learn a moment later that what appeared so alarming was really no threat at all. However, the fit of pique proved to be transient. One good look at the dragon told them just how effective their

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cure had been, and that lifted everyone's spirits again. They swarmed up the rise to greet him.

"Quite a swath you cut, friend," Mosaia greeted the dragon, and any scolding he was doing was hidden under a veneer of courtesy.

"And many more will I cut, Lord Mosaia Clear Water," boomed the dragon, "thanks to you." If he noticed any irony Mosaia's tone, he was choosing to disregard it. Returning health and the feel of the air beneath his wings and the morning sun on his face had put him in too fine a humor to respond to the remark with anything but good cheer. "I hope you good folk have not suffered overmuch on my account or my people's."

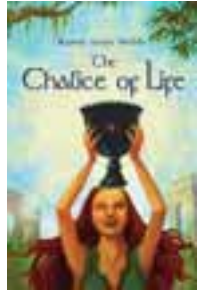
At that, Mistra's head snapped up. She had climbed about halfway up the rise at that point, and now stood staring, thunderstruck, at the dragon. The phrase had struck a chord deep within her, as if it were a coded message whose response comprised a fundamental part of her being. But there was one word too many in the dragon's phrasing, or one word too few, or one word out of place. The sense of near-recognition pulsed in her mind a second longer before it vanished without a trace. She sighed, wondering whether it was possible that things other than the information about the Sword of Rhydderch Hael had been imprinted in her mind during those long hours of preparation.

"Let us depart this moment for the land of my fathers and help my people and have them thank you properly for their deliverance!" the dragon continued. "'Tis but a half day's flight, and I can easily carry you all on my back, now that you have restored my health. I can set you down here or in any other place you wish to visit once your task is complete. In this, you have the word of Postumus, son of Peridus, of the people of the Bronze Moon."

The dragon's back could easily have accommodated a game of polo—players, ponies, field, and all. The questors, seeing that they could breakfast and even nap on the dragon's back without fear of falling off, agreed to set off at once. On they climbed, and off they flew, stopping only long enough to retrieve Sally. She climbed aboard with glee. Her fellow archaeologists had been skeptical of her entire story; now they looked gratifyingly nonplused! They stumbled all over themselves apologizing for having doubted her. The gesture returned them to her good graces but failed to get them a space on the dragon's back.

As they flew, Postumus regaled them with bits of dragon lore and tales about his own folk. He was named for his grandfather, who had been keeper of the Dragon's Graveyard. Healed, his hide had turned out to be a warm reddish-bronze, but he told them the colony in which he lived included dragons of many hues. The genetics of their coloration (Mistra wanted to know about this) related more to the factors that determined hair color in humans or fur color in Tigroids or Lemurians. The dragons in his colony all counted themselves one species no matter their specific physical attributes.

"We believe she to whom we pray loves infinite diversity," he elaborated, "and so she endowed us as the Great Mother endowed the things that grow from the bosom of the earth. I think anyone seeing us from



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a great distance might wonder if he was looking at a flower garden, for we are all colors, many-limbed and limbless, winged and wing-less, bearded and moustached and completely whisker-free! I think the only thing we share in common is our great size—and even there, I stretch the truth, for our neighbors, whom we consider cousins of dragon-kind, are the tiny spritely dragons.”

“What’s a spritely dragon?” Mistra wanted to know. “I’ve never heard of them before.”

“You’ll see,” was all Postumus would say. His tone reminded her a little of Tuhl’s when he had bestowed the Retributor upon Mosaia. “Spritely is only our word for them, and it is a grand pun, for they are spritely—like sprites—as well as sprightly—spry—for they are as tiny as the other small folk of the wood. Their own name for their own kind in their own language they do not divulge, not even to us their kin, but they seem well content with the small name we have contrived for them. And that is the term by which all the folk of wood and mountain and plain have come to call them.”

“Then they won’t mind if we call them spragons?” asked Habie.

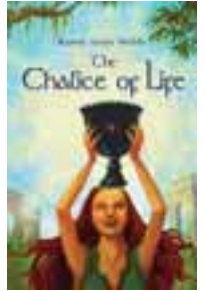
He turned his head so he could give her a whimsical smile. “I think they would find humor in it, even their Queen, and that would suit them well.”

They flew for several hours at what was, for the dragon, a leisurely pace. Still, the earth rushed past at a speed that dizzied the questors. By late morning, the dense woodland was beginning to open out into thin forest with broad grasslands dotting the landscape here and there. Presently, this pattern reversed itself so they seemed to be flying above a patchwork of jungle greens set upon a background of rich gold. It was on the plain, where the feet of a distant range of mountains marched down to the grasslands, that they first spotted the dragons. The creatures lay on the ledges formed by the interface of wood, plain, and foothill: long, serpentine shapes of every description. There were bronze and silver, cerise and lavender, four-appendaged and two, winged and not. Had the adventurers not known the creatures to be ill, they might have assumed the dragons were only sunning themselves. As they drew closer, however, they could see that the dragons lay absolutely still, as Postumus had in his illness. Each dragon was marked with the sort of “tarnish” spots that had marred Postumus’ skin, though the spots took on different hues depending on the color of the individual dragon.

Postumus spiraled downward. Without stopping to let the company off his back, he went to dragon after dragon, nuzzling each and calling it softly by name. A few stirred; most did not. Postumus, however, told them they must not interpret this lack of responsiveness as meaning his kin had gone where neither magic nor medical science could reach them.

“Praise the Great Spirit Dragon!” he said. “Time has not yet run out. I thank her that she sent such hardy souls to us, and at a time when my people might still be saved.” He lowered a wing to the ground so the party might dismount, after which he went about exploring the entire colony more thoroughly to see which of the dragons must be seen to first and who might be safely allowed to wait.

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Torreb had been prepared to continue to use his own blood to compound the medicine, since each batch required so little, but when the others insisted on contributing, he did not gainsay them. He was a little dismayed, though, when he saw them all looking to him for direction. Not ordinarily comfortable ordering the actions of others, he grasped that he was really in the best position to break the work before them into discrete tasks and portion them out. The elixir that had cured Postumus, he reasoned, the one made from blood and rubies, must certainly be the one every dragon in the entire colony would need; therefore, the two most important tasks were producing it in quantity and getting it distributed as quickly as possible. Once he had collected the blood from those who wished to contribute, he assigned to himself alone the job of producing the elixir. His reasoning here had to do not only with his priestly calling but with the dream he had had the night before their departure from Tuhl's wood: to him, the images suggested that he had been invested with the capacity to produce and empower the elixirs. His companions he formed into relay teams that would take the finished elixir, distribute it, and administer it to the ill dragons in the order of priority Postumus had determined. More design than this he could not sketch out for them: if the ruby elixir did not work, they would have to pool their skills to determine which dragons simply needed time to heal and which truly required a different approach to the problem.

This simple plan kept them busy through the middle of the afternoon, at which point it became clear that most of the dragons were responding to the ruby elixir alone. Initially, the companions treated the dragons as Torreb had treated Postumus, placing a few drops of the bright red liquid on the tongue, then applying a bit more to any "tarnish" spots they found. Those who responded quickly they let be. Those who responded sluggishly got a draught from what they had begun to call the Bottomless Bottle of Brandy. While Mistra administered the spirit, the rest clustered around the creature she was treating and rubbed, patted, massaged, chafed, or gently worked whatever parts of body or hide seemed to stimulate the creature best.

By late afternoon, they had treated every dragon in the colony. Many had already regained consciousness; a few had recovered enough strength and stamina to fly and were doing laps in the air around the questors' campsite. The few who were not responding had lapsed into the same dissociated state in which the adventurers had found Postumus. For these, Torreb performed the same sort of diagnostic mental link he had used on Postumus. He had done no more than five of these when he reached his first conclusions about what extra treatment his patients needed. A few of them needed to be treated with a second elixir, the one made of diamonds. Nearly all, however, needed a service that could only be performed through the aegis of a mental link.

"Poor Torreb!" Alla sympathized, assuming that, as he alone seemed

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to have the wherewithal to make the elixirs, he alone could perform the mental contacts.

“Don’t fret on my account!” he laughed. “I think any of us who knows how to orchestrate a mental link of any kind would be able to do it. Habie, you with your empathy; Mosaia, you with your knight’s abilities to heal; T’Cru, I think even if you lay your paws on a dragon and pray sincerely, it will work. All they really need is for someone to go deeply into their minds and tell them the crisis is over, and it’s time for them to come home.”

Although not all of them believed it could be this simple, all of them were willing to follow Torreb’s lead. So, while the priest prepared the diamond elixir (he had predictably fewer volunteers to provide the necessary humour for this one), the rest of the questors sought out the dragons that needed the small mentalic wake-up call and filled for them the role of living alarm clock.

By nightfall, it had become clear that the dragons had turned the corner that led from the road to demise to that of complete recovery. The questors’ work lasted a bit longer: the confidence that they were doing everything the dragons needed came hours before they had actually completed every task necessary to ensure the recovery of every creature. But as the moon rose and the dragons drifted off into the first deep, natural sleep any of them had had in months, the adventurers settled themselves around a fire that Habie had started (with an allusion to an episode of arson in her past). They warmed themselves and stretched out kinked muscles, relaxing and winding down from the day’s labors. Alla sat cross-legged off to one side, meditating. Her posture and aura of concentration had provoked Habie’s interest. The girl had pestered her so much about what she was doing when she had first assumed her contemplative attitude that she had finally sat the little thief down and taught her the rudiments.

“How do you clear your mind?” Habie had asked at one point. “For every thought I try to force out, I get two more back.”

And Alla had replied, “You don’t force them out. You accept their presence, then let them go like birds taking flight.”

Habie had pondered that a moment, then said, “I see. You make brain birds.” To which Alla had not had a specific reply other than a fit of laughter over the image. But the image had seemed to work for the young Lemurian. So Habie, too, was meditating after a fashion.

Elsewhere around the clearing, Mosaia had lit his pipe and was lounging against a tree blowing smoke rings; T’Cru chased his tail with the ingenuousness of a kitten. Mistra, holding onto a nearby tree, was going through a barre routine she had adapted for use in settings where her “floor” was really grass or packed earth and the only “barre” available was the branch of a friendly tree. Sally simply sat back taking it all in, a look of childlike delight on her face.

Deneth now pulled out his lute. He had paid little attention to the way it differed from his old lute when he had played to Postumus two nights

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ago: he had just let the music of the Ether flow through him. Now he took just a moment to orient himself to its shape, to the way its strings flowed through his fingers, to the way its magic suffused him. It *did* feel more powerful than the one he had brought with him to Caros, the one that had been with him since bardic college. He settled himself close enough to Mistra to accompany her. He toyed briefly with the idea of seeing how potent a charm spell the lute could direct at her, but at that moment, she flashed him a smile so warm that all thought of enchanting her (at least, magically) vanished from his mind.

Torreb joined them last, throwing himself to the ground in their midst, spent but happy. When Habie noticed him, she sprang to her feet and cried, "What a bunch of draffing idiots *we* are! Here Torreb's been working the hardest of us all, and we've done nothing but do for ourselves. We could at least have cooked him supper."

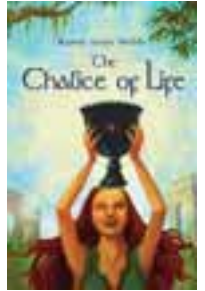
Torreb opened one eye and waved aside her overtures. "I've plenty to eat in my pack. I'll live." He yawned broadly.

"Allow me to offer more than soldier's rations," boomed Postumus. He snaked his head up over the lip of the dell in which they were sheltering. "Great store of foodstuffs have gone unused while my people lay in their deathless sleep and commerce with our human friends to the south has virtually halted. Most is dried, but you people are so resourceful I'm sure you'll work it into some serviceable fare." With one huge foreclaw, he rolled a number of barrels into the dell. There were dried meats, nuts, potatoes, dried fruit and vegetables, honey, and flour.

"This is great!" Mistra enthused. Suddenly the dance class took a back seat to dinner preparations! A gourmet cook who rarely got to exercise her talent at home, she plunged right in. "Say, Postumus, what about your friends the spragons? Are they ill? Should we be seeing to them before we get too comfortable?"

"I've seen none ill and heard no reports from their woodland friends, but that is as may be. They are a little people, and the deprivation of minerals would certainly affect them less." He chuckled—a great surging, rolling sound. "Make something creative with the fruit, and *they* may come to *you*! But, truthfully, it might be well to take such a thing to the wood to their small Queen with my compliments. I should like to send such a token to say they are not forgotten, but if I were to do so myself, I should, by my size, destroy half their homes."

Mistra laughed at the image this conjured but had a nagging feeling he was not telling them quite the whole story. She went on with her cooking, no longer limited in her magic use by the exigencies of their environment. The others pitched in with a good will. Soon they had a hearty stew bubbling on the fire, as well as various fruit compotes. As the meal neared completion, Mistra took one of their unused pans and tweaked the Ether till she had increased its size tenfold. Shortly thereafter, she put the finishing touches on not only the human fare but a mixed fruit pie the size of an earth ball.



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The small party did not rush through dinner. However, when they had gotten down to the point of sipping wine and tea, Mistra picked up the pie and told them, “I think I’ll take Postumus’ suggestion about paying our respects to the spragons. Anyone want to come?”

She did not get a resounding chorus of volunteers. “Sorry, pal,” said Habie, “I’m bushed. But if you can wait till tomorrow morning, I’m your woman.”

The others echoed this sentiment, but Mosaia voiced a different sort of caution: “It is dark, Princess,” he said, “and you might lose your way. We know nothing of these spragons, whether they are evil or live in uneasy truce with the goodly dragons we have befriended. Postumus says they consort with pixies and sprites, and that may mean mischief if nothing else: where I come from, it is perilous for mortals to wander amongst such creatures.”

Mistra inclined her head toward the deeper forest, pondering his words even as she listened to the whisper of the trees. “I feel no enmity there,” she said after a moment, and her voice had taken on a dreamy, far-away quality. “And what mischief is there is not the sort that would keep a mortal ensorcelled against his will for eternity. Besides, woods and their denizens who would make sport of you *mere* mortals might still suffer a true daughter of Minissa to pass unhindered.” She flashed him a smile—one that reassured at the same time as it said the discussion was over. At this point, she was madly curious about the creatures for whom she had put together the monster confection. Sensing no danger whatsoever sharpened her determination to seek them out, even if departing meant hogtying all six of the others so they could not keep her from leaving the camp.

“I’ll go,” Deneth finally volunteered when it became clear she was adamant about going. “I guess my soul is too magnificent to leave a lady without an escort, even after the kind of work we put in today.” He hopped up, turned to say good-bye—and took in the skeptical expressions the rest were wearing. They might only have been questioning Mistra’s common sense in going on this expedition or his in accompanying her, but he chose to read into their collective expression some doubt over what had motivated him to offer to be her escort in the first place. So, instead of taking his leave in any formal sense, he gave them his most roguish smile, touched a finger to the spot on his brow where the brim of a cap would have been had he been wearing one, and said cheerily, “Don’t wait up for us, eh?” He took in looks of amused annoyance on all faces save one: Mosaia’s, on which he fancied he saw a fleeting look of jealousy.

Mistra waited at the edge of the forest while Deneth rifled in his pack for his cloak, then jogged to catch up with her. “I think they think we’re up to something,” he said to her.

She laughed gaily. “And I think whatever parting shot you just made did nothing to disabuse them of the notion.”

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“Parting shot?” he asked innocently. “All I did was bid them farewell—and tell them not to wait up for us.” He flashed her a rueful grin. “If they took it as anything more than an admonition to turn in early after the labors of the day, perhaps it’s because they have less respect for the lore of the *tal-yosha* than I do and didn’t catch the verbal irony.”

“Could you blame them? Of all of them, you’re the only one who’s been swept up in its ravages with me.”

“Don’t remind me!”

Locating a path like a small game trail that led through the trees, they walked for a few minutes in companionable silence. Something was weighing heavily on the bard’s mind, Mistra thought, and it would be best to let him approach it in his own time and his own way. “Mistra?” he finally ventured.

“Mmm?”

“I think there were some things we never had a chance to say to each other in the aftermath of that day in the wood, things that we needed badly to talk about.”

She thought of responding with a remark about the reputation his people had for acting on the moment and never stopping to analyze their actions either before or after the fact. The instant she thought it, though, she saw it for the deflection it would be and reframed. *Against type*, she thought, *he’s taking the initiative here in wanting to open a dialogue. I need to honor that.*

She stopped and turned toward him. They had come to a small clearing just as the moon reached its zenith. For a long moment, she studied him with great solemnity, feasting a little on the way the moonlight defined the planes of his face, feasting more on the architecture of his heart and soul. *Yes*, she thought, *I have lots of things I want to say. But to a Thalacian? And one I met not a fortnight ago? Can I invite such a one into those places in my soul and trust him not to trespass?* She realized with a kind of giddy disbelief that the answer was yes.

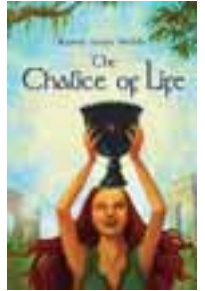
“Yes,” she finally agreed, “we did leave some things unsaid, not that there’s been a lot of time for either of us to address any matter of weight in private since that day, or even to collect our—*my*—thoughts. We said a *lot*, though—at least, *I did*,” she continued, setting off again, albeit slowly. “You were a better shoulder to cry on in the aftermath than I had any right to expect you to be.”

He looked thoughtful. “You’re the one who said it took no act of augury to tell we would become great friends. Great friends—at least those with magnificent souls—do such things for one another.”

She giggled. “I’m never going to hear the end of this ‘magnificent soul’ thing, am I?”

“Nope.” As if to illustrate the way he valued the appellation, he reached over and took the bulky pie from her. “Not that a Thalacian would know so much about how to be a magnificent soul, or even a great friend—not like a Carotian would,” he added significantly.

She smiled in wan acknowledgment of the compliment, then pursed her lips. Now that it had come to it, it was a struggle to get the words out.



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She noticed the continuation of the game trail on the other side of the clearing and moved toward it to give herself a moment to collect her thoughts. “I feel that we had an agreement,” she said, framing her ideas as she went, “or an arrangement, or—something, anyway. That day in the forest—it changed things between us, or it did for me. I feel like I’m constantly violating a truce we worked out in those first few days without ever having set pen to paper. The little coquettish things—they just keep slipping out, and not only with you. I don’t mean them to, and I don’t mean to tease with what I’m doing and saying, or to—to—”

“To seem to offer with one hand what you have no intention of delivering with the other?” he prompted.

She nodded, grateful for the way he had not forced her to say it.

“You know I don’t think that. You’re no longer affecting me because of the way we doctored you up, but I remember what it felt like before.” He chortled. “I remember Mosaia looking like he’d crawl several kilometers over ground glass to sweat in your shadow when you first met, even if he was too much the gentleman to try to nail you when he got there!”

She arched a brow at his crude phrasing but could not keep from laughing at the image.

“Gods, if you’re still dealing with that sort of pressure,” he went on, “I’m impressed that you haven’t just spirited me off and tried to astrally project me into your bed. That would be safe for you, right?”

“I am unaware of the state of the research in that particular field,” she said, playing along in her most drily analytical tone, then letting her eyes twinkle mischief, “but it sounds like an eminently logical direction for our scientists and priests and metaphysicians to go in.” The silliness of the remark made him laugh, and that felt good to her. “What is not remotely logical is that I think I’ve become afraid of you.”

“Me? Are you sure it isn’t you, or the two of us together?”

She shrugged so the gesture signified agreement rather than dismissal.

“I—know what you mean.” He stopped, turned to face her, balanced the pie on one hip so he could reach out to touch her cheek. “I think I’d like to know that if I do sweep you into my arms one day—and if you think I can keep completely apart from you for this whole quest, the *tal-yosha* has affected your brain as well as your body—we can decide intelligently where to draw the line.” He sighed a little, pulled a branch out of the way for her more as a gesture of chivalry than necessity, and allowed her to precede him. “I don’t pretend to know much about your Mysteries, Mistra, but I understand violating the *tal-yosha* causes all sorts of side-effects, most of them not physical but a few of them perilous to life. That remark I told you I made to the men I started the brawl with, the one about Carotian women not being *real* women seven years out of every eight and how I’d have to do my own research to learn the truth of the matter—boy, did *that* one come back to bite me on the -er- nether parts!”

Her laughter at that covered both disbelief at his audacity and delight at the compliment to her charms he had just implied. “Deneth bent Elias, are you paying me an oblique compliment?”

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He chortled. “Oh, it’s far more than oblique!”

She nodded acceptance of the compliment, then went on, “No wonder you got your brawl! I think my family has gotten most Carotians, even those who fought in the war, to parrot the party line about accepting the Thalacians as our brothers the same way we’ve accepted the Erebiters all along. But get them thinking about their sisters and daughters in the arms of one, and they see the specter of the angry Thalacian menace rearing its head all over again. I’ve always found it of interest that my parents and my sister and brother-in-law, who suffered the worst treatment the Toths could dish up first-hand, have just let it all go for the sake of fostering peace. It’s the common Carotian on the street who seems to hold the worst grudge with the least cause.”

“Then an excellent way to pursue my research would be to apply to your dad for a government grant?”

She burst out laughing again. “That,” she rejoindered, “or curry favor with him by finding a Thalacian woman who’d be willing to marry my brother to cement the political ties once he takes the crown.”

“A Thalacian as the future queen of Caros? There’s a plot for revenge I bet the Toths never dreamed of!”

“Of course,” she went on after they’d both had a good laugh at his left-handed observation, “technically, research grant or no, you wouldn’t understand the full effect of the *tal-yosha* till you’ve spent the whole year in the company of a woman going through it.”

“You mean it gets worse? Thank every god in the Pantheon we doctored you up, then! If the effects had gotten any more pronounced back in Tuhl’s wood, I’d have been a dead man!” As their laughter subsided, he threw an arm around her shoulders and kissed her brow. “As to the interest, it’ll still be there in a year. In fact...” He looked intensely reflective. “I don’t know how I know that, or why—I just know it. I’ll be around you and you’ll be around me this time next year, and for many, many years to come.” He waited a beat, as if he were giving her ability to perceive the universe a moment to catch his vision.

“I know it, too,” she murmured, mystified that it should be so. More of that sense of giddy delight swept her.

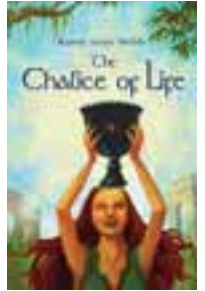
He grinned. “At any rate, if it all turns out to be no more than superstitious claptrap, your folk have designed one of the more colorful pitches I’ve heard for keeping their youngsters innocent!”

She felt her mouth open in a crooked smile but wondered what message her eyes had just given him for the way he sobered abruptly.

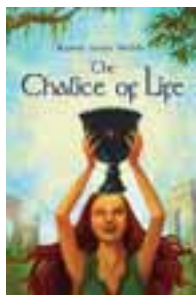
“It’s not, is it?”

She pursed her lips. “It’s not like it gets tested that often that there’s a great deal of evidence.” She looked into the middle distance, seeing scenes she had periodically tried to wall up in memory. “But having had two consorts with the attendant bonds placed, and having had both bonds broken, shall we say, less than felicitously—” She sighed, rubbed a spot between her brows where a knot was threatening to form. “—I believe every story I’ve ever heard about it.”

“Living without a bondmate during one of these years—is that what



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accounts for the emptiness I feel in you sometimes, for the frayed edges of your psyche?”

She felt her eyes widen as she turned to face him.

“That time in the woods,” he offered by way of explanation, “that moment when our minds were so open one to the other. I felt it. I haven’t been prying, honest!”

She did not realize till she swallowed that her throat had gone dry. Like Habie and Mosaia, he kept demonstrating that he was in some ways far more perceptive—far more fit to be tutored in the Mysteries—than many of her own people. “I lost my first consort.” It just tumbled out before she had a chance to preface it.

He smacked his forehead with one hand. “Of course! Your partner Isildin. You and he were famous. It was an assassin’s bullet meant for another, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. “He died in my arms. I think you would have found a clean edge to my psyche at that point, though,” she added with a grim smile. “I—” She began, faltered, tried again. “I—there’s a reason for it all, and it’s only partially due to the *tal-yosha*.” She rubbed her brow. *A Thalacian, she thought, and I’m trusting him with this faster than I’d trust most of the people I grew up with! My family would be thrilled.* “There is more than one way that a bond can be forcibly broken.” Haltingly, as they walked, over the course of many minutes, she got the story out.

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What a story, Deneth thought as he held her in the aftermath of its telling. “So, for the second time, you might just as well have been widowed,” he concluded.

“In a way,” she agreed, drying the very few tears she had shed. “At least a widow usually gets a body to mourn over.”

“I think I’ll go back now and see if either Torreb or Mosaia has a spell or a healing technique or an artifact that will help me excise my foot from my mouth.”

Her eyes opened wide in disbelief. “What can you possibly think you’ve said?”

“Oh, just the whole ‘There were things we left unsaid’ routine. This was obviously not the moment—really, *really* not the moment—to be going into it. I didn’t show up at Isildin’s funeral and pressure you into giving me the coordinates for your bedchamber, but I feel like the difference is one of degree rather than substance.”

She reached over to squeeze his hand. “You cast yourself in too unfavorable a light! And, in some ways, this is the *perfect* moment. Right now, I feel even more warmly toward you than I usually do. How could I not? You broached a subject that’s been easy for neither of us to confront, and then you *listened* while I emptied my heart—you, a spontaneous, silent, unthinking Thalacian male! Why? I think you want to understand how what happened that day in Tuhl’s wood impacts us personally; I think you even want to make sure that any ramifications don’t include jeopardizing

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the quest. And believe me, after watching the three of you stripped to the waist so you could work this afternoon without dying of heat prostration, the interest is there! I, too, would like to know that we're capable of embracing as more than friends without taking leave of our senses, that there is some middle ground between the slight distance of friends and the intimate closeness of lovers. I could drown myself in you very easily just now. I would need you to believe there was more to it for me than escaping the pain—but I would also need you to understand that escaping the pain might be part of it.”

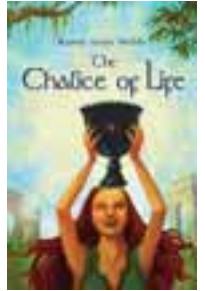
“Just so I'm not *adding* to the pain.” He touched a hand to her cheek. “I don't think I could bear that.”

They lapsed into a companionable silence and continued on their way. He knew she shared his sense that the moment when they might safely search out that middle ground, close though it was, had not yet arrived. His sense that the moment was approaching intensified as they strolled deeper into the woods. It was, he thought, almost upon them when something up ahead caught their attention. The forest marched away into shadow on all sides, but immediately before them lay a glade ablaze with light: not stark white light, but one made of muted pastels interspersed with the deepest of blues and violets, all dancing and sparkling in an infinity of joyous patterns. In Mistra's face—indeed, in her entire being—he read unmitigated delight as she darted lightly forward. He allowed his attention to be not diverted but completely captured by both the woman and the scene unfolding around her.

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For all her prodigious magical and psionic skills, Mistra loved dearly the simple magic of colors and lights; it was partially for that reason that chemistry had captivated her in early childhood, then come so easily to her at school. Now, stepping forward so the scene took her in its embrace, she saw the lights resolve into flowers of every description from worlds known to have the most delicate, or the most flamboyant, or the most breathtaking blossoms in the known galaxy. The glade was carpeted with a soft, deep, springy turf; a little fountain bubbled into a pool at its center. She beckoned Deneth forward, helped him to set the pie down, then, moving as one might in an ineffably pleasant dream, executed a little balletic *enchâinement*. So swept up was she in the beauty that she purposely put aside the thought that a formal flower garden sculpted with trellises and set about with cobblestone pathways did not belong in the middle of a jungle the hand of man had not otherwise touched.

Deneth was wandering about also, taking it all in. But where Mistra had been enchanted by the garden itself, what absorbed him was the sight of Mistra *in* the garden. She looked so beautiful here, so *right*. He had heard her sister and mother refer to her as a true daughter of Minissa and shelved the description as so much rhetoric; now he was not so sure they hadn't understated their case! He had just decided to pluck a bouquet for her and was wondering if it was safe to do so—the place reeked of



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enchantment—when a variety of the blossoms dropped from the air above his head and landed at his feet. He gathered them up and presented them to her, then motioned to her to turn round. His hands, though large, were nimble, and in short order he had braided a number of the flowers into her loose hair. The flowers seemed to give off a light of their own. The day they met, he had categorized her as a great beauty; the sweat and grime of two days of heavy labor had failed to eclipse her loveliness. Here in this enchanted garden, bathed in the radiance of the flowers, she looked like an elven queen.

“Elven lady, wondrous fair [he recited]
Touched with the wisdom of the gods,
Kissed by the warmth of a kind summer sun...”

She applauded in delight at both the verse and the flowers. Something about the magic of the place made it seem like a reality apart from the one in which they had sought the cure for the dragons’ malady. She had a sense of complete *unreality*, in fact—or a sense that the reality she and Deneth had entered when they stepped into the garden was one in which her heart was neither bruised nor encumbered. The moment when they could safely explore that middle ground, she thought, had arrived.

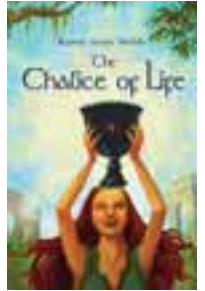
Sobering a little, she said simply, “Come here,” and it was enough. Deneth swept her into his arms. Their lips met. They kissed not deeply, but sweetly, like shy teenagers experimenting for the first time. A warm fog smelling faintly of lilacs in spring enveloped them. They breathed deeply of it, attributing the phenomenon more to the heat of the moment than to any particular magic of the garden, and found their legs could no longer support them. Deneth had just the wit to lay his cloak on the ground beneath them before they tumbled to the grass in a flurry of giggles. (Luckily, the moonstones and glue had dried into a supple mass comfortable to lie on when draped on the springy turf.) They intertwined and fell apart several times. With each embrace, they kissed more deeply, explored more fully, caressed more thoroughly. Yet each touched the other with sensitivity, with gentleness, with no thought of provoking any more of a response than the other could fairly give. This was romance rather than unbridled lust, and it would take them nowhere from which they could not retreat as friends in the morning light.

Innocent as it was, they found they could only stay with it for so long. Once or twice passion built to the point that one of them was about to ask the other to step back; once or twice desire started to peak so that they knew they were skirting treacherous waters. But each time disaster was about to threaten, they collapsed in a fit of giggles. It was completely involuntary—in the middle of a kiss or a caress, mouths and arms and legs would simply stop functioning for a moment, and they would fall apart like rag dolls. The attendant giddiness was pleasurable in its way, but the thought that they were being prevented from doing what they had been about to withdraw from voluntarily was annoying.

“What *is* this?” Deneth asked, at once amused, annoyed, and mystified. “I thought the effect of the *tal-yosha* drove your men in

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the other direction. This is like what happened when Habie tried to whack that pirate's head off."



That was when they heard the silly cackle for the first time. They looked up. There, hanging upside down by its prehensile tail from the branch of a rhododendron was the smallest dragon either of them had ever seen. It was blue with a lilac underbelly; from its shoulders sprouted tiny wings that had the size and shape of a butterfly's but the movement quality of a hummingbird's. It wore a smile as wide and silly as its cackle had been. Its exact length was difficult for them to determine, for, as it regarded them, it kept telescoping its neck forward and back: it might have been a meter with its neck completely extended. It looped the branch several times, still hanging on by its tail, then unfolded its wings and fluttered lightly to the ground beside them.

"What an adorable little dragon," Mistra gushed. She held her hand out to it as if it were a tame bird she was encouraging to light on her fingers but kept misjudging the distance between her hand and the creature, so, although it was trying to play along, it kept hopping and missing. Due to the fluke of metabolism that prevented Carotians from getting even remotely happy on ethanol, Mistra had very little experience with uninvited drunken euphoria—she could think of no other name for what she was experiencing—and so was out of her depth. She made one final attempt to beckon the dragon, lost her balance completely, and collapsed across Deneth's middle in yet another fit of giggles.

"I'm not `an adorable little dragon'" it replied, obviously taking exception to the appellation. It was a chirpy but obviously masculine voice. "'Tis only by comparison with those great lummoxes, our cousins, that we seem small. But, then, they get all the press and publicity, especially the evil ones who spit fire and denude the human villages of their maidens, so I suppose it all works out."

Mistra looked up, bleary-eyed, and found herself nose to nose with the creature. "A spritely dragon?" she guessed.

He bowed as well as he could. "So the larger ones of our kind have dubbed us, though we consider ourselves a breed of coatl and not true dragons at all. But it will do, it will do! Anthraticus of the House of Parhamaer, at your service."

"Here, did you do this?" Deneth accused. He crowded in for a better look, first upsetting Mistra, and then landing on top of her as a result of his struggles. He handled himself fairly well when he was drunk, but this sort of uninvited euphoria was new to him as well. He tried to look stern but could maintain his frown for no longer than three seconds without bursting out into gales of laughter.

"Yes, yes, 'twas I!" Anthraticus cackled. He sprang into the air and landed on Deneth's head, then snaked his long neck down so he could look the bard in the eye. "'Twas such a delightful scene you two were making, I thought I'd help it along a bit. Ah, well, too much, too soon, I suppose."

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“What?” Mistra choked. “The euphoria?”

“Oh, the garden, the pool, the lights, the sense of giddiness.”

“Spells?”

“All but the giddiness—that’s just a little cantrip I created some centuries ago for the amusement of my queen. It in essence converts a portion of its victim’s blood into whatever substance will best impair his centers of thought and coordination, and in the quantity necessary to induce anything from mild giddiness to complete stupor.”

“Interesting application of the Art,” Mistra observed as the small creature somersaulted off Deneth’s head and flew out over the garden. “A spell usable for entertainment or defense.”

“I’m not sure I like being enchanted into being anyone’s entertainment,” Deneth grumbled. “Well, not under *these* circumstances.” He shot her a mischievous grin.

She laughed appreciatively, then emitted a heartfelt groan: as the spragon flew around the garden, the flowers and other trappings were disappearing bit by bit in his wake. “It was so pretty,” she said wistfully. She put a hand to her hair and found that the flowers were still in place and still fresh. She tweaked the Ether in an effort to make them stay that way.

“The effect of the spell will wear off soon,” Anthraticus assured them, “and I have yet to meet the creature who’s suffered any sort of ill effect in its wake.” He circled Mistra’s head a few times, obviously puzzled that the flowers in her hair had not vanished. “I say, are you keeping me from countermanding my own spell?”

“Yes. Deneth worked so hard to braid them into my hair, and they’re so lovely, I can’t bear to give them up just yet.”

“’Twas not the only thing he was working hard at by the look of things!” Taking in the fond but slightly shy glance that passed between the two humans, he chuckled. “Well, you must be a mighty practitioner of the Art to be able to vie successfully in thought with me. What brings you here?”

She beckoned to the pie, which floated lazily into her lap. “Postumus,” she began, then repeated, “Postumus?” as a question to make sure the spragon knew their draconian friend by name. Seeing that he did, she continued, “Well, Postumus sent us to look in on you. We were supposed to present this to your queen with his compliments and see if you were suffering any ill effects from the sickness that’s ravaged the larger dragons.”

“We cured them, you see,” Deneth joined in.

“Well, well,” said Anthraticus, “I *am* impressed. Had I known you were so versed in your skills, I would have tried more powerful spells, or possibly left you alone completely. How is it you succumbed to my humble arts at all?”

He exchanged another sheepish grin with Mistra. “I think our attention was elsewhere.” He drew out the “I” so it came out “Aaaahhee,” then let the rest come out in a rush.

“Ah. Yes. I see. Well, then, I will take you to our queen posthaste.”

“No more tricks?”

“None needed. You see, you are already in the heart of our realm.”

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The glade lit up again. Now, at last, they saw it for what it was: a grassy sward bare except for lights dancing like otherworldly fire along the perimeter. In from the trees at its edge came swooping spritely dragons of every description: tiny yellow ones no bigger than a hummingbird, medium-sized ones of green and orange, and largish ones like Anthraticus in blues and violets.

While Mistra stood absorbed, Deneth felt his ire rising. While he hadn't minded sharing in the joke with its perpetrator, he was put out to learn that he and Mistra had been under observation the entire time by an entire tribe. "Next time you cue me," he whispered as he helped Mistra to her feet, "do it when we're someplace a little more private."

She gave him a look that combined annoyance, chagrin, and amusement, then composed herself to meet the procession fluttering down the center of the glade. Here were obviously the Queen and her attendants. The Queen was a little smaller than Anthraticus, deep purple with wings that might have been made of black velvet. On her head sat a tiny gold crown. Her violet eyes were both kind and wise. Mistra dropped a small curtsy; as she did so, she poked Deneth in the ribs so he got the message that he should bow as well.

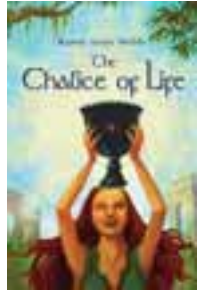
"I am Queen Tasmira," said the Queen. "I bid you welcome, and I excuse myself and my tribe to you that we kept ourselves hidden, leaving our good Anthraticus to give us some entertainment at your expense. There are strange tidings about your company, and I feared to leave our first contact with you to my normal sentries, adept though they are. I trust you are well now? There are no aftereffects from the enchantment of your minds?"

"Yeah," Deneth growled. "We're just peachy." He studiously avoided the glare Mistra aimed at him.

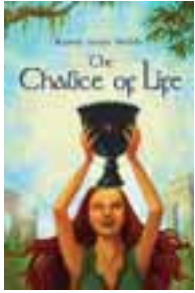
"You must excuse my friend, your majesty," Mistra said with as much grace as she could muster under the circumstances. She forbore to add, "He is an idiot," although the sentiment came across in her tone. "He is not," she continued, "from a world where magic use is the norm, as it is on mine. I am Mistra, third child of Strephan and Amina of Caros and sister to Ariane, High Queen of the Carotian Union. My friend is Deneth, first child of Elias and Andora of Thalas: he is a bard of great repute in our home system. Together with our good companions, we succeeded in finding the cure for the malady that, till today, afflicted Postumus and his people. He asked us to bring you this gift—" She indicated the pie. "—and to inquire if your people have been affected by this illness. If they have been, we can help. He -um- did not go into detail about why such a confection constituted an appropriate gift."

Tasmira laughed. "That is easily answered, Mistra of Caros. We have no baking craft of our own: our foreclaws are prehensile but neither strong nor nimble. What you humans do with this skill is as magic to us and baked goods as precious as jewels and gold. I see you were thoughtful enough to bake one large enough for all of us to partake, and I thank you for your consideration.

"As to your other question, I am pleased to hear that Postumus and his



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kin are well again. We had despaired of ever seeing them made whole. A few of us, at least, think enough of our larger kin that we would see them restored to health without poking fun." She shot a pointed glance at Anthraticus. "Now, while our people have not yet shown symptoms to the extent those of Postumus have, there are those whose falling scales or fading colors suggest we *have* been stricken by this malady. And some of us have succumbed to an illness that bears no resemblance to that suffered by our larger kin but resists every effort our wisest healers have made to cure it. Whether our case will get no worse or if the illness progresses only slowly in our race so far worse is to come I do not know, but I will do service to Her in your names all the rest of my years if you will attend my folk as you have those of Postumus. Do you have the remedy with you?"

"No, we left it in our camp. The priest who travels with us has the most skill in their creation and use. He is weary from his day's labors, but I'm sure he would at least take a look at your folk who are ill even so."

"Very well. Anthraticus, you will go with the lady Mistra and the lord Deneth as my official emissary and beg the services of this good priest on our people's behalf. We shall await him here." She heard Deneth suppress a groan. "And do you make amends to these good people. Soothe their anger so they no longer harbor ill will toward us, else they may beg their priest to have no dealings with us at all, or bid him use his skills to our woe rather than our weal."

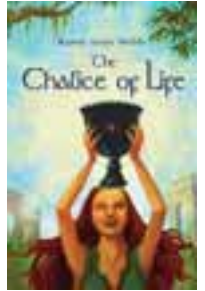
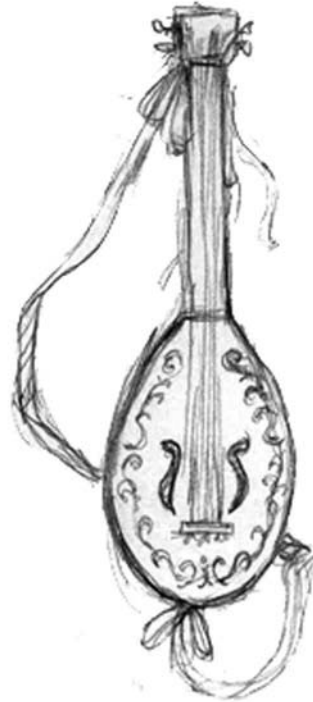
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CHAPTER 11

The Final Problem



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"If you desire with all your heart, friendship with all races in the cosmos, your thought, spiritual and positive, will spread; it will become the desire of others, growing stronger and stronger, until it reaches the minds of all men."

—The Book of Life

Although Mistra was being as gracious to the spragon as a daughter of royalty knows how to be, Deneth was muttering imprecations under his breath as they began the trek back to their campsite. Anthraticus was fluttering around the bard's head despite his periodic efforts to bat the silly creature away. The spragon was prattling away at top speed, much as Sally did when she got excited; he seemed pathetically anxious to please. In a gesture Deneth considered to be magnanimity above and beyond the call of duty, he reined in his indignation and attended to what Anthraticus was saying.

"I can do all sorts of things that you might like," he was offering. "I can make all sorts of lights and phantasms, or call forth a guardian spirit to travel with you and watch over your camp while all of you sleep. I can create any sort of place you might like, like I did with the garden back there, either by altering materials that already exist or by shaping them from the fabric of the air we breathe. I could teach you my little fermentation cantrip. I could even grant you a wish—not a difficult wish,

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granted, but a wish all the same..."

"Oh?" Deneth's ears perked up at that one. He stole a glance at Mistra, then shelved the thought for a later time. "Go on."

"Hmm." He hovered in consternation, then brightened. "You're a bard, eh? How about my divining some bit of lore you've always been curious about but could never track down? Perhaps something you could make a song of."

He was suddenly all interest, none of it prurient. "Really? Anything?"

"Yes—well, within reason. It takes a little while if it's something I've never heard of, and sometimes I need to handle an object involved in the history or the legend."

"Qualify `a little while."

"Oh, well, I must confess, it took me nigh on a month once. But 'twas a very obscure legend from one of the elemental planes, and I had naught but the most rudimentary of artifacts from which to work."

"I see. Could you just *teach* me the spell?"

"*Teach* you the spell?"

"Thalacians have the latent potential to work spells the way Carotians do," Mistra clarified, "and bards have some training in physical magic. I mean, it might take your ability to grant wishes to enable the spell in a human, even in a child of Thalybdenos. I think the draconian—or *spragonian*—way of working magic must be fundamentally different from our use of the Art on Caros. Even the best minds on my home world aren't completely sure how it is that a bard accesses the Ether, especially on a world that's denied its own access to the Art Inborn for as long as Deneth's folk have."

"But you said—"

"I said that on Thalac, magic use is not the norm. I didn't say Deneth didn't have some facility with it. I was trying to be diplomatic and act the way one does in the presence of—foreign royalty?" She inflected it so he knew she had spotted him (correctly, as it turned out) not as the court jester but as someone quite high up in Tasmira's counsels.

"Hmph," said Deneth. "All diplomacy amounts to is using a lot of fancy words to say what you don't really mean to begin with. I'm in the corps, remember? Or, I was till this stupid thing showed up on my shoulder on its way to the person it was really intended for." He waved vaguely at the area where the Stag had appeared.

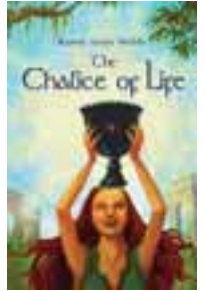
"I guess I can do as you ask, lord Deneth," the spragon went on, "if your wish is to be given the ability to divine the legends and histories associated with people or items you come across. Do you still desire this, and will it settle the score between us?"

"Yes and yes. You've hit upon the heart and soul of a bard, I'm afraid, and I have one thing in mind already to try it on."

"Princess Mistra?"

"She undoubtedly will *become* a legend—probably in her own time—and have lore spring up around her," he laughed. His eyes twinkled the more mischievously as he caught her look of annoyance. "I had something else in mind. It's a Stone we carry about with us..."

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When the trio returned to camp and introduced everyone and explained the situation to the others, Torreb immediately agreed to go. So did Alla, Sally, and T’Cru, as much to help the priest as to meet more of the “dear little creatures,” as Alla put it. As they took off, Mistra and Deneth joined Mosaia and Habie by the fire.

“Come here, Anthraticus,” Deneth invited. “We shall go apart a little, you and I, and you will help me learn your spell, and I’ll show what we do on our side of the orbit when we want to invite oblivion.” With a look to Mistra for approval, he scooped up the Bottomless Bottle of Brandy. She pulled from her belt the small pouch in which she kept the Portal Stone and surrendered that to him as well. And off they went.

In less than ten minutes, much to his surprise, Deneth began to warm to the little coatl with the same ease with which he had warmed to most of the questors. Habie’s appellation of “spragon” seemed to fit him far better than the terms “dragon” or “coatl,” however modified, could.

“You mentioned oblivion?” Anthraticus prompted as they set to work, but doubt was in his voice.

“A slight exaggeration,” replied Deneth.

“I see. Could you be more precise, then?”

Deneth guffawed. “Don’t you know what drunken euphoria feels like?”

“No, dear boy. We’re completely immune to certain effects of our own magic, the way a serpent might be to its own venom.”

“Gods, what a pity! I had thought of trying to get you to do a repeat performance so I could pay attention, or maybe Mistra could, and see if there was some potential for giving your spell a material form—y’know, a potion, a gas, something that could be bottled? I could make a fortune!”

“Do you mean by selling it as a weapon?”

“No, by selling it as a tranquilizer, something to lighten the heart and loose the tongue, as we do with this stuff. And just think—no beer belly to worry about, and no hangover.” He looked from the bottle to his camp cup and back, decided neither would do as a vessel for his snouted friend. Glancing around to make certain they remained unobserved, he rifled around in Sally’s pack for the sewing kit. “Ah, here we go!” he said, pulling out a large thimble. He filled it with wine and proffered it.

Anthraticus took it but eyed it dubiously. “Your kind, they *desire* to feel this way?”

“Well, some don’t indulge, and most don’t do it on a continuous basis, but yes, many of us use it recreationally on occasion. Mistra’s people have wine making down to a fine art, but they metabolize alcohol so fast they don’t get the effect the rest of us do. That was, I think, her first experience being seriously intoxicated, or the first one that was not by choice.” To encourage his new friend, he poured himself a cupful and set to. Heartened, Anthraticus followed suit. His “glass” being tiny, he soon wanted more. Deneth obliged him many times that evening, although he made certain that the spragon was still relatively sober when he taught him the spell he had promised.

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Anthraticus' eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when he saw the object Deneth wished to investigate. "Where did you get it?" he asked, awestruck.

"Mistra from a great sage on her homeworld and me from Mistra. It's the directional tracer we use to locate the Portals that take us from place to place while we're on this quest."

Anthraticus put his fourth thimbleful aside to examine the bauble. "It is not of this world. I'm not sure it's of *any* world, to say truth. I think it would be more useful, friend Deneth, if I were to teach you my spell, then study the Stone myself along with you so that we can draw our conclusions each from his own perspective."

"Good enough. What do I need to do?"

"Well, first, my boy, you listen while I teach you the words and gestures. Then you sit back and relax while I infuse both you and the spell with the energy necessary to endow you with the power to use it."

"Infuse? I thought physical magic was just a matter of teaching words and gestures and such."

"Oh, no. Mistra was on the right track with her musings. The trappings of this spell—the words and gestures—are simple. But the discipline of mind it takes to control it and make its use profitable is something I could only fairly expect from another of my kind, and a mature one at that. That is especially true if the wielder hopes to examine an object of such an ancient, otherworldly nature. Beyond that, we are an ancient race, and magic is bound up with the very fiber of our being. I'm not sure I could teach such a spell unaided even to someone like Mistra, who needs no particular conduit to channel her energy as you use your music. If I wish it into your very being so it becomes a part of you, it will be yours to use forever and ever; it's quite possible you will even find another way to express it that comes more naturally to your kind."

"You mean I might figure out how to cast it with a song rather than an incantation and gestures?"

"Exactly!"

"Oh. Well—right, let's get to it."

"Righto! Pour me a bit more of that ba-randy, won't you, there's a good fellow."

"I hope that wasn't the complete extent of your cultural exchange," Mosaia remarked as Deneth and Anthraticus vanished over the lip of the dell.

Mistra helped herself to the tea they had been keeping warm over the embers of the fire. "No, not exactly," she chuckled.

"Tell me, tell me," Habie chirped.

"Tell you what?"

"You know..." She glanced significantly in Deneth's direction. "Was he any good?"

"Habadih!" Mosaia and Mistra said it together; while Mistra

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seemed amused as well as mortified, Mosaia said it with the threat of a growl that would have made T'Cru proud of him. "How unseemly," the knight continued.

"I knew this would happen," said the Retributor, which Mosaia had left partially unsheathed so they could converse. "The bard's unsavory influence is wearing off on the poor child. And I'd just begun to think she could be saved from a life of iniquity with proper instruction. Tsk."

"Oh, come off it!" said Habie, mainly to Mosaia. She cast a dirty look at the sword, then wondered if it had any way of perceiving when a look of any kind was directed at it. "You're just as curious," she said, aiming the remark entirely at Mosaia, "if not for the same reason. I saw how you looked after them long after they were really out of sight."

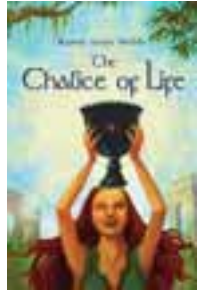
"You did?" Mistra asked, thinking it was the mere concern of the group's defender but surprising (and quickly stifling) a pang of hope that it might be more. She wondered briefly if the *tal-yosha* were affecting her brain as well as her body and soul.

He tried to brush it off. "Merely my concern for two members of the company going off on a mission whose safety was still, to my mind, questionable. Er— Habadiah, would you go and see what Deneth and his new friend are up to?"

"I get it," she grumbled. "The adults need to talk. Watch him, Mistra. When he calls me by my full name, he's got to be serious about something." But she went off without further protest.

Mosaia glared after her briefly, then turned to Mistra. Now that he actually had her undivided attention, he was unsure how to proceed. Her look was encouraging, as if she valued whatever he might have to say, but the very force of her presence, the steady gaze of eyes that were like emeralds fading now to sapphire, now to amethyst—he felt unnerved in the way he had been unnerved the day he had first met her, although not to the same extent. He had achieved only a nodding acquaintance with her parents and sister and had never met her brother, but he wondered if she, as a third child, was destined never to come to a crown, what the rest of the family must be like once one got to know them well! Would they, he wondered, appear to his unschooled eyes like the Divine given human form?

Collecting himself, he lowered his voice. "Forgive me, Princess. I know our cultural mores have clashed on at least one occasion since we set out. As we do not joke freely about relations between the sexes in polite company, so we do not fraternize as freely. In my society, a single man and woman walking alone together by moonlight connotes a certain understanding of their relationship—a level of commitment, an intent on the man's part to offer the woman marriage and an expectation that she will accept, if, in fact, they have not already settled the matter. I know you enjoy Deneth's attentions, but at home I doubt either your court or mine would allow a bard to pay court to a ruler's daughter, no matter how high his birth. If I interpret correctly, if by Carotian custom there could be no future for you, I would ask that you take that into account in your interactions with him. Not that you would deliberately mislead him, or he you, or that he



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would ever compel a woman's favors by force, but I-I've seen the way he looks at you with such longing as..." He shrugged, afraid to say too much and wrongfully besmirch the bard's character. "That is all I wanted to say."

"Hear, hear!" said the sword. "In fact, you give the knave too much credit."

Mistra gave the sword the same sort of look Habie had given it. To underscore her point, she reached over and shoved it back into its scabbard before she returned her attention to Mosaia. She had been expecting the lecture ever since she had left the camp against his advice and had been gearing up to be incensed by it, but his warmth coupled with a manner that was caring rather than dictatorial won her over. She rested her hand on his. "Thanks for your concern, Mosaia. You -um- either haven't noticed or are too much the diplomat to mention that I look at him in much the same way. And at you, on occasion."

His face lit. "Oh?" For a moment, joy welled in his heart. Then he flushed to the ears.

Mistra smiled graciously. "I'm sorry, I've embarrassed you. I didn't mean to. Neither of us wants to do anything that would endanger the quest in any way, if that helps set your mind at ease."

My mind, he thought, *I'm not so sure about my heart*. Aloud, he said, "My apologies, Mistra. You have clearly taken more thought for this than I was willing to give you credit for."

"I have taken *some* thought," she replied, then sighed and gave him a wry smile. "In fact, we thought we had it all worked out in the days right after we met, when he and Habie and I were waiting for the rest of you to appear on Tuhl's doorstep. We'd owned the mutual attraction and catalogued it as something we wouldn't act on, end of story. There is a grain of truth at the heart of the jokes Thalacians make at our expense about how cerebral and deliberate and contemplative and overly-civilized we are—more than a grain! Carotians are probably such poor gossips because on Caros very little worth gossiping about ever happens: we all consider the ramifications of our actions far too thoroughly before carrying them out. But I suppose the fact that he went along with it means either that Deneth is far less a cultural archetype than he likes to let on or that the press we give the Thalacians is far less warranted than the press they give us."

He smiled affably. "Perhaps your culture has only learned to put into practice the dictum that so many parrot without ever learning to apply. You know what I mean: see everyone around you with a fault-covering eye, perceive only the good in people even if the evil in them outweighs the good a hundredfold. I think if you play to a person's higher nature, if you expect from him honorable conduct, nine times out of ten he will respond."

It stopped her cold for a moment: she had never looked at it in quite that light! "So we have such an idealized society because we've learned to treat one another as if we were our own best selves? We've in essence created our world by not only believing so strongly but by acting? What a lovely idea! Maybe Sally should come and study *us* for a change." She took a moment to savor the way her own society appeared through his eyes and found the image appealing. She flashed him a smile meant to convey her

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growing belief that his soul was far less prosaic than he liked to let on, as well as her complete approval.

"Anyway," she continued, "the positive side of the image is that no one raises an eyebrow over otherwise innocent behavior that would probably result in a shotgun wedding in a lot of cultures. The union of man and woman in our people happens on so many levels simultaneously that the thought of an intimacy of the body not already underpinned by great intimacy of the spirit holds little appeal for most of us. Our stricture on relations between the sexes is exactly like our Ethic—it's based not on a strict legal definition of chastity but on the principle that, if we choose to share that much of ourselves, we do so with the wisdom of Caros and the kindness and spiritual generosity of Arayne and the sense of reverence of Eliannes." The smile she flashed him this time was wan, and she studied his face for any sign that her frankness might be offending him. Seeing none, she proceeded. "People from worlds that *do* have strict laws governing such conduct are often surprised to learn what a deterrent that principle is in a society where the unintended conception of a child is so rarely an issue!"

"You mean they expect that since you have no legal strictures, you observe no social ones?"

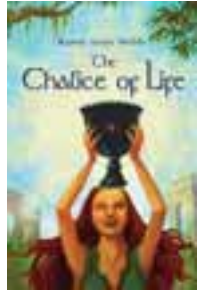
"Exactly. How did Deneth frame it? Oh, yes—he said he wondered that he saw no sign that said `bacchanalia this way.'" She chuckled at their friend's ability to cast a situation in its most colorful light, and so did Mosaia. "Most are also surprised to learn that our *Book of Life* and *Book of Wisdom*—our two main Scriptures—acknowledge only four kinds of love: that of the sentient soul for sentientkind, that of the sentient soul for the Divine, that of the Divine for sentientkind, and that of the Divine for Itself."

He pondered a moment as if he were doing a sum in his head, then nodded in comprehension. "I see. No mention of the separate genders of sentientkind for one another—of man for woman, for example."

She nodded. "What I don't know is, was that written to say that however many genders a species has or how many species there are in the universe, the underlying principle applies that the love of sentient beings for one another can transcend those differences?"

"Or does it just mean that the love that transcends the grave, even for so intimately bound an entity as a wedded couple, has nought to do with physical attraction? An interesting conundrum when, for most sentient species, it is that physical attraction that allows the species to perpetuate itself!" And over that observation, they found they could also laugh together.

"So," Mistra concluded, "in answer to your earlier remark, yes, I have given it some thought." She sighed, shook her head, and shifted her gaze to the middle distance. "All the thought in the cosmos is not enough to brace you for the shock of having the *tal-yosha* come on you at unawares, not when you're forced for long stretches into the company of men who are as attractive in spirit as they are in body. If I am denied intimacies of the body and the relief of a bond of any sort, still I am very hungry for connection with others, for intimacy of the mind and spirit. I am deeply sorry if any of that hunger comes across as wanton flirtatiousness, and I'll do my best to—



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What?" she asked, taking in his bemused expression.

"I don't believe we're having this conversation."

"I'm sorry! Have I offended you again in some way?"

"No, just taken me by surprise. There are certain things..." He paused, frowning. There were certain things what? That one didn't discuss, or discuss with a woman? His position on either count was indefensible, as he had opened the conversation. She was only philosophizing, wasn't she? He gave her a quirky smile. "I've begun to wonder if my God or your Minissa didn't send me on this quest just to teach me a lesson in humility, and if they're having a good laugh at my expense at my reaction every time I have my values challenged by the rest of you. I have never before *had* my values challenged, and I think now that perhaps I have taken them too much for granted."

"Your values are ours."

"In terms of qualities of the spirit, I'm certain they are. I meant more that—oh, for instance—women and comrades in arms are mutually exclusive in my culture. What I would say to a brother knight, I would not say to a woman, not even to my sisters or my mother, and vice versa."

Her smile was even quirkier. "You would caution a fellow paladin about a woman bent on seducing him but you would not sit and philosophize with any woman at all? Is that it? You would encroach on such sensitive territory with a man but enter no territory at all with a woman?" She frowned, trying for a moment to make sense of it but failing. "That is not logical."

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"Somehow, on Falidia, where all folk—well, *my* folk, at least—think in those terms, it makes some sort of sense, though—yes—when I try to defend it, it does not seem logical at all, nor even reasonable."

Mistra considered a moment. "We are, all of us, finding our way, I think. Those of us from Caros are worlds apart from one another, those of us from the same racial stock are worlds apart from one another. Just being from another system doesn't make you that much different from any of the rest of us. But I've been rude if I've made you uncomfortable by discussing things that go unspoken in your culture. You must tell me if I do so again."

"Oh, no—our conversations are most pleasant, most edifying. I just have to reorient my thinking. I feel I do *you* an injustice if I try to think of you as only a comrade in arms—you are much too comely a woman for me to think of you as just that!—or as just a comely woman—you have too fine a mind and are much too skilled in other areas for me to see you as just *that*." His eyes went wide as he saw her drop her gaze; he thought there was the faintest suggestion of dusky rose on her cheeks. "I've embarrassed *you*?"

She met his eyes. "Earnest appraisal from you somehow has the same effect as Deneth's most overt attentions. It is..." She gestured helplessly as she sought for the right words.

"Not logical?" he offered with a smile that combined amusement and sympathy.

She nodded. "And probably insulting. I know you don't intend it that way."

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“Now I see why you and Deneth fell into such an easy camaraderie. You express and understand yourselves in much the same way, I think. You -um- speak the same language.”

She smiled sweetly. “Artists in related disciplines often do. But you and I alone of the company are warriors sworn in some way to a goodly deity and schooled in the courtly graces. I think we, too, speak the same language, or would, if we could but recognize it.”

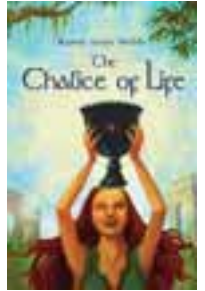
He inclined his head once in agreement, his eyes not leaving hers. In that moment, he experienced the mental equivalent of staring at a picture of a vase and having it suddenly resolve into two profiles. He looked up, and the phenomenon seemed to be happening all around him, everywhere at once, but the heart of it was here. “I thought when I had completed my schooling, I had left my lessons behind me for good,” he said solemnly. “Yet here is a great lesson indeed.” As humble a servant of his God as he was, it was a wrench for him to acknowledge such a thing, or admit it to another. He had, however, the keen sense that Mistra understood without his having to elaborate, that he could trust her with his life and, if necessary, with the lives of his heart and soul. It was a heady sensation—at once foreign and wonderful.

Mistra replied by doing something that surprised them both. She reached a hand up to one of the contacts at his temple and sent the message that words were inadequate to convey: that she sensed his reorientation so clearly because she was going through something similar, that his sense of trust in her was well-placed, that she dared communicate this way uninvited because that trust was returned. Although it was a simple message, it took some effort to send: evidently, the psi points in his race were rudimentary. She watched as first shock, then concentration, and then wonder appeared on his face. When she broke the contact, she found herself having to blow on her fingertips from the heat it had generated. She flashed him a grin that commented ruefully on her own folly in attempting the contact but saw written in his face what she knew in her heart to be true: broad as was the gulf that lay between them, they had just taken their first halting steps toward bridging it.

Habie, having been summarily dismissed by Mistra and Mosaia and having found Deneth occupied, padded off down the trail she had seen Torreb and the others take. Well, Habie guessed, it might be fun to meet dragons—*spragons*, she corrected herself—closer to her own stature.

A brisk walk brought her to the glade where Tasmira was holding council with the others. Things did not seem to be going along as smoothly as they had with the larger dragons. From what she could hear, Torreb had examined some of the spragons who had shown mild symptoms of the disease and tried out the ruby and diamond elixirs on them. He was explaining now that his diagnostics told him he might need all five of the elixirs to effect a complete cure on the entire colony.

“We managed to do up a batch of the sapphire and emerald elixirs



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earlier this evening while Deneth and Mistra came out here to find you," Torreb was saying. "While gathering the fluids necessary to *those* solutions involved a little discomfort, I'm not sure how to get the spinal fluid from anyone short of vivisectioning him."

"Well, we can hardly justify vivisection or human sacrifice for the purpose of saving the lives of coatls," Tasmira rejoindered, "no matter our numbers."

"*My* people have ways," said Sally, "but it takes special equipment and skill that I lack."

"Is it equipment that Mistra could produce if you described it to her?" asked Torreb.

"Produce? What? Poof, and it appears?"

"Your Mistra is a very powerful sorceress," said the Queen.

"Oh. Oh, I suppose. But it would need to be perfectly sterile and I'm still not sure I'd trust myself to do it even if I had the equipment. It involves a needle in the spine: I could end up crippling my subject if I aimed wrong."

"Do you have any ideas, T'Cru?" Alla asked.

The Tigroid shook his head. "With all due respect to my society's changing ideas and my own beliefs, it would only be our lowest caste that had anything to do with obtaining bodily fluids in the sense you are discussing. If the hunting and killing of a non-sentient beast would be of any use to you, of course, I would be happy to oblige, as long as the collecting were left to someone with more -ahem- manual dexterity."

A pause while they considered. "I think," Sally finally ventured, "I don't *know*, but I *think*, that the gems won't do anything if they're mixed with a fluid from a non-sentient creature. It's an impression, no more, but..." She shrugged, but the rest nodded silent agreement.

The silence that descended after Sally's remark lasted so long that Habie wondered if Torreb and the rest had simply run out of ideas and consigned the spragons to certain death. She began to go over in her mind what little she knew of the Lemurian empathic healing techniques to try to reason out if any of them would help. She had not gotten very far when Alla spoke. "There is a way," she said, and her voice was heavy. "Like the technique Sally speaks of, it's very delicate, a kind of—well, I suppose you would all say it *looks* like magic, but it isn't, not really. And it would take some time. I have done it, but I must meditate beforehand and rest for some time after."

"What is it?" asked Tasmira. "Is it dangerous?"

"Only to the practitioner. It involves forcing one sort of tissue out through the spaces in another, a little like a transport beam but with mentalic energies instead of electronics. Some of my people do ritual births that way, coaxing the infant from the womb without labor. This would be the same sort of thing."

"You do it to yourself?"

"No. I would need a subject."

"I'll do it," Torreb volunteered.

"No—we'll need you to mix the elixirs."

"One of my subjects perhaps?" Tasmira offered.

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"I'm not sure how to tell who's already affected. Do you know, Torreb?"

"No," the priest replied. "I'm afraid not. At least one of the spragons I examined for reference—one that appeared totally healthy to my eyes—*had* contracted the illness. I caught that one, but I'm not confident even now that I can distinguish totally healthy from marginally affected."

"And we would need someone totally healthy—and totally willing. I will not do this to someone who is forced, even if it's only by a sense of guilt."

"Wait a minute," Sally spoke up. "What about me?"

"We have no claim on you, Sally," Torreb reminded her. "Still..." Both he and Alla looked uncertain. Habie's raw empathic powers (as well as her skills of observation and her knowledge of sentient nature) clued her in to what they were thinking, and they seemed to be thinking the same thing. It was the questors' task to cure the dragons, and did they have a right to call on another to take the place of one of them?

Moved by their dilemma, Habie stepped forward into the clearing. "I'll do it," she said firmly, uncertain of what was prompting her to volunteer. "I don't know exactly what you're talking about, but it sounds like it has to do with our quest and stuff, and—well—I trust Alla. If she says the risk is worse for her and she's willing to take it, she can work her technique on me if it'll help, magic or no."

Tasmira launched into the air and circled Habie's head a few times before she came to rest hovering before her. She fixed the girl with her large, solemn eyes. "What a delightful little humanoid!" she commented. "She accepts the unknown danger for a worthy cause because her heart is pure."

At that, Habie roared with laughter. "A pure heart? *Me*? I don't think so."

"And how modest. I would be honored, child, if you were to take the trouble to be of service to my people. Indeed, I wish I had a hundred of my own with spirits as untainted by life's vicissitudes."

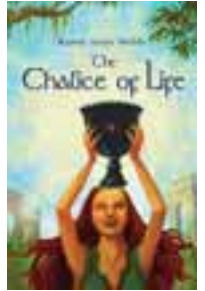
"She's serious, isn't she?" Habie asked, completely mystified, as Tasmira fluttered off.

Alla nodded.

"What's a vi-vicissitude?" She got the word out with difficulty.

Alla's eyes danced, though she kept her face composed. "I think it's most of your life till you fell in with us." She threw an arm around Habie's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Thank you, Habie. If you'll wait here, I shall go and make ready." She went to Sally and took her hand. "Dear Sally, it was an offer well made, but I fear this may take not only the humours but the valor of people not native to your world." Then she tilted her head in that way Habie had noticed meant she was listening—to the wind, or the Ether, or the music of the universe. "There *will* be a part for you to play," she went on, feeling her way, "but it will come far later." Without another word, she disappeared into the wood on the opposite side of the glade.

Sally stared, open-mouthed in astonishment. "Why, whatever did she mean?"



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“Oh, come on, Sally,” said Habie. “Haven’t you figured out by now that we’re not from here, and that ‘not from here’ doesn’t just mean some continent you’ve never been to?”

“Then where are you from?”

Torreb tapped her on the shoulder. When he had her attention, he pointed heavenward.

She went white as a sheet, and her knees began to wobble.

“No, no, no!” he reassured her, putting a hand out to steady her before she collapsed. “We’re mortal enough. We’re just from a different planet.”

“How did you get here? Flying saucers?”

“No, actually, though we do have spacecraft. No, we were gated, or ‘sent,’ you might call it, through a magic Portal, and our only way home is by going through six more of them and fulfilling a quest. Home for most of us is just what Mosaia said—the Carotian Union, though if that’s in your galaxy or in your past or present or even your future, I’m not certain.”

As he spoke, the fear and skepticism drained from Sally’s face only to be replaced by wonder, and her eyes glistened as if they were filling with tears. “Then it’s *real*? There really is life out there?”

“Oh, sure,” said Habie, wondering what the fuss was about. “Lots of it. Even I know that.”

Torreb brushed a tear from Sally’s cheek. “My dear, why are you crying?”

“Because—because I’ve been waiting and hoping and believing there was something more all my life. And everyone’s always said I was crazy. It’s like I was telling Alla and T’Cru: I just don’t seem to fit in this time. I want to live in the past, in the time of Zargirt; or maybe I want to live in the future, if what you’re telling me means there *is* other life in the universe just waiting for us to find it but my own people are too obtuse to see that just yet. I just (sniff) wish I had opened my eyes sooner. I would have learned more and—you know—drunk it all in more deeply. To have living proof that there really is life beyond the stars, and that that life is kind and good and has advanced so far technologically without blowing itself up—it’s *much* better than what you’ve been calling magic.”

Habie chucked her on the thigh. “Yeah, well, I knew I felt something real different than what you were saying every time you said something was silly, like you were hoping deep inside that one of us would contradict you in a big way.”

Shyly, Torreb put his arm around Sally’s shoulders and let her sob. Habie came and held her hand. Presently, she stopped crying and looked at Torreb and Habie and the Queen of the spritely dragons. Her face lit, and for a moment she looked to Habie truly beautiful, wrapped as she was in a waking dream of bliss.

It was only a short time later that Alla reappeared and beckoned to them. “Come,” she said. “I am ready.”

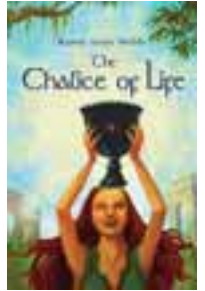
Alla retrieved Mistra from their camp, then gathered Sally, Habie and

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Tasmira. Torreb surrendered the chalice to her when she asked that only her female companions remain with her during the ritual, though the request puzzled him: the Erebites and their kin made little distinction between the sexes when it came to such arts as healing. But Alla replied that, for her kind, the flow of energies generated by uniting the spirits of a group of beings of one gender were different from the energies generated by a mixed group, and that this ritual required that the participants all be of the same gender as the one performing it.

“My people have a saying about it,” she said. “*With one, you make the journey out; the other, the journey back.* For good or ill, the phenomenon manifests itself.”

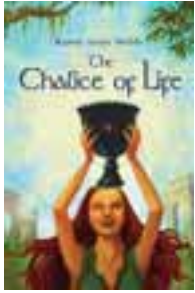
So Torreb wished her gods-speed in her endeavor and gathered the men to him with the request that they join him in keeping vigil at a distance. To this, Mosaia and T’Cru readily agreed, but Deneth excused himself, saying that he did not keep vigil well in the company of others. In a short time, as the men settled themselves, they heard the mournful strains of his lute: it was at least as good a prayer as any of them could make.



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CHAPTER 12



The Final Answer

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“The perfume of flowers goes not against the wind, not even the perfume of sandalwood, of rosebay, or of jasmine; but the perfume of virtual travels against the wind and reaches unto the ends of the world.”

—The Book of Wisdom

“I would have thought your people lived too much in harmony with the natural world to believe in segregating the sexes,” Mistra commented to Alla as Tasmira led them to a small glade that her maidens had prepared for them. The sorceress did not mean it as a criticism; she truly wanted to understand.

“We only segregate them for certain rituals like this one,” Alla replied, not taking offense. “Surely as a daughter of Minissa you know that pure female energy has its own attributes, as does pure male energy, and that a mix of the two produces a different set of attributes—a different *feel*—completely separate from the other two.”

“We spragons have rituals of this sort,” supplied Tasmira, adopting Habie’s nickname for her species. “We often find balance in having a companion ritual conducted in the wake of the primary one that employs only the opposite gender, as Torreb is doing, or a mix of the two.”

“Yeah,” said Habie. “Even *I* get that. It’s not like those holy people Mosaia talks about where they stick all the men or all the women together

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and that's it forever and ever. Now *that's* seriously out of whack."

Mistra frowned thoughtfully and nodded. "I see. Spragon and *Aranyakan* society preserve their balance overall. I think I was seeing in your simple truth the pitfalls of societies like those Habie is describing, where segregation is the norm—the ones where women get such terrible reputations as gossips or men as ruthless warmongers, where both seem to be comprised of nothing but pettiness and hard edges."

"What you say is true," said Alla. "If it goes too long unopposed, energy of any sort can feed on itself, turning inward and becoming destructive. But as to feminine energy, when it maintains its purity and is wisely directed, for healing and creating, there's nothing quite like it in the cosmos."

Alla now bade Habie lie on the ground, as she also deemed contact with the earth important. She placed herself at Habie's head, Mistra at the girl's feet, and Sally and Tasmira to Habie's right and left so the four of them formed a diamond with Habie at its center. Setting the chalice before her, Alla sat cross-legged and signed to the others to do likewise and to sit palm to palm.

"Will it hurt much?" Habie asked in a tiny voice.

She stroked Habie's brow lightly and said in her most soothing voice, "It will not hurt at all. You will sleep and dream whatever pleasant things Lemurians dream, and afterwards, you will feel renewed."

Mistra looked up, catching the inflection that implied Alla would feel just the opposite. Alarmed, she exchanged a look with Sally and Tasmira; they, too, suddenly looked uncertain about the wisdom of letting Alla proceed with the ritual. Mistra had just opened her mouth to beg Alla to reconsider when the *Aranyaka* closed her eyes and began to chant.

Anooloo insikooa atka'anoo...

The sound simply died in Mistra's throat.

Chooba Bakatondakooli udantioo...

None of the participants in the ritual had a clue in what language Alla intoned, but something about it stilled all conscious thought. A power as implacable as it was all-consuming took them in its embrace. Yet, mighty as it was, it did not seek to conquer. It was a gentle force, one that wooed and caressed its listeners rather than choking the life from them with merciless fingers.

Palla anidwehi imilalla iksoo...

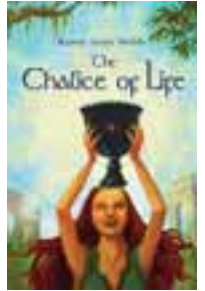
Its effects began subtly. First, the air in the glade began to throb. Next came the sense that energy was coursing up through the ground and infusing their bodies. The effect became so pronounced as it traveled upward that Sally and Mistra thought they felt their hair curling and standing on end, and Tasmira felt a sensation like electricity crackle down her mane.

"Like a wilted stalk of celery revived by immersion in water," Mistra and Sally said to themselves.

"Like the tingle in the Ether that heralds the onset of a massive thunderstorm," thought Tasmira.

Tal pa hastoo ammi ma'amahaliloo

Imiqititalla!



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A sudden biological imperative cut off all further attempt at thought. As one, the three women found themselves drawing a single enormous breath: they had less choice about when and how deeply to inhale than a babe slipping from its mother's womb. Something in Alla's chant imbued that breath with the same vital quality, the same urgency as that first sharp inhalation that awakens a child to life. To refuse it was to die, while to yield was to partake joyously of all that was best in creation. Heat flooded their veins. Sally, Mistra, even Tasmira with her vast weight of years—for all three, the sense of revivification that they experienced in that moment was so profound that their lives till that point seemed a dream from which they were just beginning to awaken.

Pa empungu empoolgooma waka'ayo...

It was in the wake of these final sensations that the images began to come.

Tal pa toolovdatsi illahoota wego...

Sally, who had neither psionic gifts nor direct connection with the domain of Minissa, saw in her mind's eye visions of such striking clarity that she might have been beholding them in waking life. All around her, images of the most titanic forces of nature took shape. Here, a waterfall cascaded down many hundreds of meters to a roiling pool; there, a volcano spewed molten rock into the air. Turning, she saw the great cycle of life unfolding around her. She heard the lusty cry of an eagle as it soared through the heavens, the neigh of a wild mare as it galloped across the plain, the roar of a tiger stalking its prey, the bleat of a young buck challenging the old for mastery of the herd.

Tal pa tuttootpaqla kipilichi flatay...

For Tasmira, who lived deep within Minissa's domain, the images were far headier. Initially, she beheld these scenes as Sally did; seconds later, she was undergoing the perceptual shift that meant she had stepped into the bodies of these creatures. Flash! and she became the tiger, felt the racing of blood through her limbs as she brought her prey to ground. Flash! She stepped into the body of the mare and felt the wind lash her face as she ran free and wild across vast meads. Another step, and she felt that same wind bear her aloft: she had become the eagle winding her lazy way to her aerie atop a jagged cliff. A final step brought her back to earth, where, as the buck, she readied herself to do battle with the great lord of the forest.

Tal pa wiequa ittilbyoola lliya'ati

Apihlichilalla!

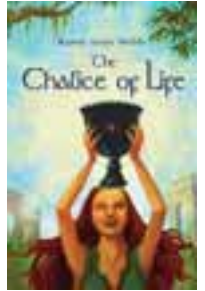
Mistra, whose strength in communion with the domain of Minissa was so profound, surrendered to the rush of sensations perceived by Tasmira and experienced yet more. As the tiger, she knew the moment of rapture when predator and prey became one. Reaching with her mind, she felt the thrill of the doe succumbing to the buck who had emerged victorious from his challenge. Another reach of the mind and she felt the pangs of birth as the wild mare giving birth to her first foal. Yet another and she felt the cycle of life complete itself within her own body as she became the mother eagle diving for the kill to feed not herself but the newly-hatched young who awaited her in the eyrie.

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KAREN ANNE WELLS

Tal pa siqieiq, tatqiqilla, wluqilla...

The images faded, and still the chant continued, going on for so long that the three watchers felt themselves adrift in a sea of timelessness. Like the great spiral dance that was life itself, the chanting had always been and would always be. In that altered state, they felt the earth subsume them, after which they were taken to the bosom of the sea, lifted high into the air, and, at last, dropped into the heart of the blazing sun.



Torreb came to himself in their camp aware only in that moment that he had completely lost contact with the outside world. Though he could not see the sun, the quality of the light around him told him it was just cresting the horizon. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sought to remember. He had left the chalice with Alla late the previous evening, after which he and the males in the party had returned to camp. Deneth had gone apart to keep solitary vigil while he, Mosaia, and T'Cru had positioned themselves in a circle within the camp and begun to pray. A circle within a circle, he had thought at the time, and how fitting a pattern that was. The sweet, somber melodies of Deneth's lute had wafted toward them.

Qixakilla, nigatchiabyotoqalla...

Not long after the bard had begun to play, Torreb had become aware of a second sound, less musical in the strict sense but still rhythmic, pitching itself now higher, now lower. He knew Deneth's reputation as a musician, but he had not understood in full till now why it was so well deserved. For, as he listened, he heard the music of Deneth's lute blend with the hypnotic sound he had soon identified as Alla's chanting. Each would have been moving enough on its own. Together, they wove a spell that took the strength of the earth and the brilliance of the stars and set both free in a wave of primal power. How the two themes could have blended so well, he did not know. They could not have rehearsed it. Deneth must be following Alla's lead somehow, or else the same hand—the hand of Thalys herself, perhaps, or Phino—touched them and flowed through them both to create that living splendor.

Musokoo ella llaqublooqtuqilla...

Sometime after he noticed the way the two songs had woven into one and felt the power begin to seep into his limbs, he began to see as with his waking vision scenes from other times and places.

Abàhli iisa falammifa chilla

Hanakbotóofola!

It began with the simple changing of the seasons in the wood around him. Rainy season became the season of heat, then the season of cold. When he had watched the cycle unfold many times, he felt himself borne up as he had been on Postumus' back that morning.

Infayli akka michoo baholillo...

As he rose through the upper airs and was able to see forest as well as jungle, he understood that what he had taken to be the simple changing of the seasons was exactly that—but it was happening in reverse! Dead leaves

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rose from the ground to attach themselves to trees; the leaves went from saffron and amber to green, then curled into their buds and retreated into branch and twig. Snow seeped back out of the ground, then rose swirling into the heavens above him.

Pal okulooka imiquo'olalla...

He rose higher above the planet's surface than he would have thought human could do and live—and still he climbed. Now he saw all of Astra spread out below him, saw the Hamani Empire at the height of its spiritual glory, saw with a shock the true genesis of Sally's fascination with the chalice. Now he saw Astra, its moons, its entire star system. He must have grown to tremendous proportions, or else the cosmos had suddenly shrunk, for the next thing he knew, he was walking among the stars, using them as one would use stepping stones to cross a brook.

Ahoofanti kagapikkatkolallakul...

Next, he knew that something decidedly odd was happening, for, although his size altered no further, the spaces between the stars began to shrink. He was being vaulted back in time, he decided at last, back and back and back yet again to the beginning of time itself. And as he saw all matter resolve to a single point of light in an endless dark immensity, he finally understood with his heart what he had long understood with his mind: there had been an existence for some of the Great Ones—beings that man would come to call prophets or revelators, the *kanami* of Thalybdenocian lore—before the universe had been called into being by the One.

Wa imminitachi tiritchiqio'ollul

Attitayimola!

Torreb gasped as he got the first glimmer of that sacred snow-white spot removed from time and space, of the Sheltering Tree under whose branches that great assemblage of the divine and near-divine had taken place.

Tiritchiqio'ollul

Attitayimola!

A moment longer, he thought with fear and trembling and exultation, and he would be witnessing the Great Day of Creation itself!

Tiritchiqio'ollul

Attitayimola!

A moment longer, and he might gaze on the face of his patron, of the One...

Attitayimola!

It was at that moment that something had awakened him. Now he pulled himself from the haze of recollection. As he had known in his vision that he was rushing back toward the Day of Creation when he had had only intuition and instinct to guide him, so he now knew beyond the shadow of any doubt that something had gone terribly wrong.

In that same moment, Mistra, Sally, and Tasmira woke as one. But where Torreb had awakened to the sense that something had gone wrong,

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the women woke only to the profound sense that nothing in their lives had ever felt quite this right. It took all three an entire minute to get past the sense that the glade had been created for them an instant before they woke: the colors and shapes had that startling a sense of freshness about them. It took them another full minute to recall that they had a purpose in life other than reclining in the fragrant grass—that they had, in fact, been assisting in a great task when sleep had overcome them.

When they could finally tear themselves away from contemplating the color of the leaves and call to mind exactly what that task was, their eyes fastened on Alla and Habie. Alla lay draped face down across Habie's still form, as if the *Aranyaka* had thrown herself protectively across the body of her friend at some critical moment during the ritual. Beside them sat the chalice, filled nearly to the brim with a clear fluid. Habie seemed unharmed; she was sleeping but responded immediately when they tried to rouse her. As Alla had predicted, she felt refreshed.

Alla was a different matter. Mistra, Sally, and Tasmira helped to extricate Habie, then turned Alla gently to her back. They gasped as one. Alla's eyes, though open, were staring and sightless. She did not stir. Sally pressed an ear to Alla's chest, then felt for the pulses in her throat. "She's alive," she pronounced, "but barely breathing."

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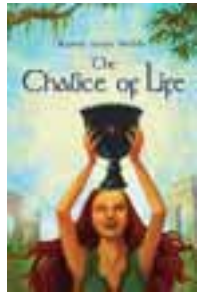
Mistra touched a hand to Alla's brow and bowed her head. She called Alla's name softly several times, reached out in thought...

...and roused herself an instant before the healing trance would have taken her. So light a contact had not enabled her to do anything to help Alla, but it *had* told her that the *Aranyaka's* condition was like nothing she had ever encountered before. "Sally, your majesty," she said softly, so as not to alarm either them or Habie. "Would you go and fetch Torreb?" She waited till they had left the clearing, then motioned to Habie. "I lack the skill to wed our talents together, but—would you just see what your skills alone can turn up while I do what I can with mine?" *Which might be precisely nothing*, she thought as she lost herself in the contact.

A priest of Thalybdenos had taught her the healing technique used by the Erebiters, but, while she had great facility with the Art and Disciplines when used separately, this meticulous a blending of the two did not come easily to her. Still, she tried, seeking for Alla's mind with her own, letting all fade from her consciousness save its sense of self and the object of its pursuit. She perceived Alla's mind in the void that lay before her, a small flickering light like a will-o'-the-wisp. She could not get beyond that, though, could not make the void resolve into the pastoral image of the mindscape that meant her mind had connected with her subject's.

She pulled herself back to awareness of the world around her just in time to hear a new voice say, "Something went wrong in the night. I felt it." *Oh, good!* she thought as she identified the voice as Torreb's. *The Marines have landed.*

She felt compelled to report as she might have felt compelled to recite



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when, as a child, one of her teachers had called on her. “This is beyond my skill,” she told the priest as she and Habie made room for him to kneel between them. “She’s withdrawn totally into herself. I wish I knew whether this is the normal aftermath of the technique she used or cause for alarm. Whatever, Alla must have used quite a bit of effort to draw that fluid from Habie’s spine.” She took in the look of surprise on Habie’s face as Torreb looked to the little thief for her opinion: the girl still betrayed shock from time to time when the others gave any indication they valued what she had to say.

“I’m sorry,” she said in reply to Torreb’s mute query, “I can’t make anything of what Alla’s doing either. It’s like I can’t really find any physical damage, so I can’t find anything to absorb. And I just don’t get it. *I feel great.*”

Torreb nodded curtly. Mistra watched as he took Alla’s hand in his and laid his free hand on her brow: he looked troubled but determined. The look of determination stayed put, but the troubled expression turned to one of alarm as he made a quick pass at Alla’s mind.

“You’re right, Mistra,” he told her presently. “There is some dysjunction there, so the mind and soul, the heart and body are not quite one.” He touched the chalice and sighed: Mistra wondered if he were pondering who of Alla and the spragons had the more urgent need. “Perhaps if you or Mosaia could—”

Without warning, Alla stiffened. Her eyes rolled back in her head; her arms and hands twisted into unnatural shapes and started to twitch. Mistra could see Torreb shelve thoughts of taking time to delegate any of the work or decide whose condition took precedence. He all but thrust Alla’s hand into hers as he repositioned himself at her head. Cradling her head in his hands, he shut his eyes and concentrated. So clear and single-minded was his purpose that Mistra could actually feel him withdraw from them; she could even follow him part of the way into the contact, could sense his struggle to search out Alla’s mind, to form the tenuous link that would allow him to reunite it with her body before her soul irrevocably took flight.

Feeling she would not be of any use to him if she got lost in the contact herself, she withdrew. When she looked up at the other three women, she wished she had continued to follow Torreb, for they were looking to her for direction! She cast about frantically for a moment till an expansive gesture brought to her ears a sound that suggested an avenue of approach. Looking in the direction of the sound, she saw her wristband—and the symbol of the Tree that hung from it. The symbol had always tinkled like faint fairy bells if she moved her arm abruptly. She had received it at her consecration, a tiny likeness of the Great Tree that sheltered the Orb of Caros, carved from a fragment of the Orb itself. She rarely took it off, but now...

Her course became clear to her, and thought gave way to action. She relinquished to Sally the hand she was holding and motioned to Habie to take up Alla’s free hand. Next, she removed the Tree from her wristband, knelt beside Torreb, and carefully tucked it between the fingers of his right hand and Alla’s cheek. She was just turning to Tasmira to ask if her people numbered priests among them or used religious symbols of any sort when

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Mosaia, Deneth, and T'Cru tumbled into the clearing.

"Look!" cried Sally. "Men!"

"Yes, that's something I've been struggling with," Mistra snapped, not seeing Sally's point at all.

"Clear out, you guys!" Habie barked, recalling Alla's assertion about the necessity of using only females for the ritual. "Maybe Torreb shouldn't even be—"

"No, wait!" Tasmira joined in. "Remember what Alla herself said about the energies generated by those of the opposite sex."

"With one you make the journey out, the other, the journey back!" Sally exclaimed.

"But that meant only that women have one set of strengths and..." Although Mistra had begun the statement with conviction, her voice trailed off as she rethought Alla's words and their implications.

"I dunno, Mistra," said Habie. "If Alla gets any more *out*, she's gonna be *in* another universe."

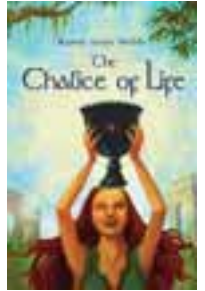
"Then... Of course! I understand now. *We're* the ones who need to clear out for a bit. It's time for the men to take over."

"Yeah, OK. Except—well, you better know just what to do with them," Habie said, jerking her head toward the small cluster of newcomers, "'coz *I* don't know, Sally and the Queen don't look real inspired, and Torreb ain't in any condition to tell them." She illustrated by pinching the priest hard on the arm. He did not flinch—in fact, he did not seem aware of her at all.

Mistra held her answer back for the fraction of a second it took her to make sure her reasoning was sound. When she responded with, "I do, Habie," she infused the simple phrase with a sense of serene confidence.

She tackled Deneth and T'Cru first, half-hauling them across the clearing and setting them beside the priest. To Deneth, she said simply, "The Lay of Liandra," and to T'Cru, "The Rite of R'Rhu." When they obeyed immediately and without question, she breathed a sigh of relief. That song and that rite were among the most powerful healing magicks known on all three worlds of the Union. Like Deneth's music and Alla's chanting of the night before, the two—the rite chanted, the lay sung and plucked on the lute—blended into a single harmonious music. Mistra wished she had time to stop and fully savor the effect.

"Mosaia!" she said, taking the paladin by the hand and dragging him to Alla's side. "Make physical contact with Torreb," she said, laying his hands on the priest's shoulders, "and lend him your strength." Mosaia's mouth dropped open, as if to ask how exactly she expected him to do that. Mistra did no more than hold his eye for a moment and put a little pressure on his hands with her own. Seconds later, she felt him drawn gently into the contact. She saw his eyes open fractionally wider as he felt the conduit open between his own life force and the priest's. There was a pause, as if the priest were somehow asking permission to draw on the reservoir of strength that dwelt within Mosaia's great soul. She felt the paladin consent, then stood by to make sure his knees did not buckle from the way the torrent of power suddenly flowed not only *from* him but also *into* him like a river of living light. At the last, she felt him relax into the contact and



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surrender to his own intuitive sense of how best to shore up Torreb's efforts. If the situation had not been so grave, she would have burst out laughing at the knight's thought that it came as a revelation that he had any intuitive sense at all!

She backed away, fussed a little with all three so they formed a physical shield around (or an umbrella over) the priest. When they asked her later why she chose that configuration, she could do no better than to say that that was the way she had perceived the lines of force in the Ether.

Satisfied with her work thus far, she moved till she felt she had completely cleared the field the four males from the party were generating. "Ladies?" she prompted when Sally, Habie, and Tasmira just stood gawking at the men.

"Habie," she continued as they took the hint and followed her to the extreme edge of the clearing, "who ended up with the most moonstones?"

"Well, unless you want to pry them loose from Deneth's cloak," she replied, "I guess Torreb. Want me to run and get his pack?"

She contemplated, reached out in thought. "I think I can save you the trip." She bent her will toward it. Seconds later, a light pulsated before her. Seconds after *that*, Torreb's pack appeared within the pool of light. The women tore into the pack with a good will and shortly came up with not only the gems but vials containing the other two elixirs they needed.

"So this is what the rest of you were doing while Deneth and I were off making first contact with the spragons," Mistra laughed, holding up the emerald and sapphire elixirs.

"Hey, you don't see any grass growing under *my* feet," Habie shot back good-naturedly. She added for Mistra's ears alone, "But I bet a little got trampled under your back, huh?" She braced as if she expected Mistra to swat her.

But Mistra only chuckled. "You want the whole story now that Mosaia's not aware enough to keep you from asking?"

"You bet."

She grinned, thought how best to let her friend down gently. "Deneth did little more than whisper sweet nothings in my ear," she said with perfect serenity and an extremely straight face, "so I guess you *could* say we had aural sex."

It took Habie about a second and a half to decipher the play on words, after which she guffawed loudly. She broadcast her thought at such volume that Mistra picked it up and joined her in her fit of mirth: Carotian royalty was a less stuffy bunch than Habie could ever have imagined!

"I conked out while the rest of you made these up," asked Sally, oblivious to the exchange. "Do I want to know who contributed what?"

"No!" said Habie. "Nor how, on some of them."

"But how do we determine which ones each of my people needs?" asked Tasmira in consternation.

Mistra was trying to formulate an answer when an incoherent grunt from Torreb drew their attention. When she looked, she saw that, although his eyes were glazed, he had pulled himself to the threshold of consciousness. He tried to gesture with one hand, but his movements

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were so jerky that she wondered in alarm if he were beginning to convulse as well.

It was Sally who first realized he was trying to hail them while sparing as little energy from the contact as possible. The four of them scuttled as one to his side, then had to lean in very close to hear his brief, throaty directions. When he had finished, he touched Sally's hand and pointed to the chalice. Sally grabbed one of the moonstones and was about to cast it into the chalice when Torreb gripped her wrist and spared a bit more energy to incant—something. Mistra recognized the language as Old High Thalybdenocian, although if her life had depended on her translating it, she would have given herself up for lost. Briefly, a golden glow flared in the space where Torreb's hand met Sally's wrist. Mistra looked from priest to archaeologist and back, grasping that Torreb had somehow just empowered Sally with his ability both to make the elixirs and to administer them correctly.

Her first reaction to this was to think an irate "What?!" *For the sake of every god in the Pantheon!* she continued. *He's got two of us with natural access to the Art, one of us a born priestess, and an empathic healer. Have I managed things so poorly? Why's he wasting the energy to empower a complete mundane??!!*

But any irritation she felt melted away as she saw the change come over her friend. Sally flushed as if she were feeling an intoxicating warmth like that from sweet, strong drink sweep through her. For a moment, she looked to Mistra as if she had achieved what she had hoped her tribesmen had accomplished, and the serenity born of having attained unto all knowledge seemed to suffuse her being.

The moment passed; Sally came to herself and set to work, throwing several large moonstones into the chalice. The fluid bubbled and steamed for a moment as a sweet, fresh scent filled the glade. Torreb, in a final moment of lucidity before he withdrew back into the trance, dipped a finger into the precious fluid and touched a drop of it to Alla's tongue. Immediately, her breathing eased and the color returned to her cheeks.

"Now," Torreb whispered. He beckoned to Tasmira. "Bring... ill... folk." He waved her off, then pointed to Sally. "Mistra... help her... you will know... what to give where... *Remember...* small drops... potent..." And he lapsed back into his trance.

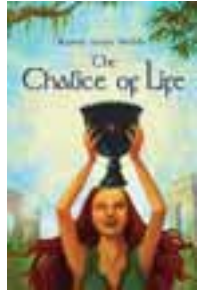
"Golly!" Sally exclaimed, genuinely surprised. "It's up to us."

"Up to you, really, my dear," Tasmira said gently.

"What?!"

"Looks like Torreb just left you in charge, Sally, old girl, old girl" said Habie. "After all, he told Mistra here to *help*, but you're the one he whispered that fancy incantation to that made you light up like a High Summer's tree."

"I lit up?" she asked, incredulous, but also giddy at the thought. "With good reason, I guess. H-he told me—" She swallowed hard. "He told me I'm



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the heir of Zargirt—in spirit, and maybe even in body! I mean, I saw it in his mind. In the visions he had while Alla chanted, he saw the eventual fate of Zargirt’s family, and—somehow, I don’t completely get how or why—it all comes down to me. *That’s* why he could empower me to work the chalice. *That’s* why he chose me over any of you who already seem to know what you’re doing. He -um- seemed to be thinking even as he uttered the spell that he must be right about it all because it was taking so little effort to empower me.” As the others stood gaping, she took a huge breath as if gearing up for a plunge into icy water. “Well, then, let’s get started...”

The four of them began by pouring the elixirs into the myriad vessels the spragons now brought them. The vessels were tiny works of art, quaint bits of glass blown, Tasmira told them, by the heat of spragon breath, and then permanently enchanted to help with great works of healing. When they had finished, Sally seated herself; the others set before her one vessel of each Elixir. Sally then nodded in the direction of the small group of ill spragons.

Sally had done very little to direct them so far: the steps they had taken to this point had just occurred logically to all four women. Now, however, as the first spragon fluttered weakly forward, the archaeologist turned to her three assistants and mouthed desperately, “What do I do?”

Habie, Tasmira, and Mistra exchanged a helpless glance. “He said you would know, Mistra,” Habie prompted.

“All right,” said the sorceress, collecting her thoughts. “Well, if *I* were the one in the driver’s seat, I might touch one hand to its brow and then hold my other hand over each of the vessels in turn and see what happens. You know: sparks, lightning bolts.”

Sally looked determined to try, though she had caught the nuance of dry humor in Mistra’s voice. She muttered an “All right, here goes,” then did as Mistra had suggested. Nothing happened when she held her hand over the first vessel, or the second, or the third. But the fourth, the one into which the diamonds had gone, glowed with a soft white light. She dipped her finger into it and placed a single drop on the spragon’s tongue, as she had seen Torreb do with Alla. He fluttered off, instantly strengthened. They repeated the procedure, and the next fluttered off. And the next. And the one after that.

Much of the work, though, was not this straightforward. Many of the ill spragons had to be assisted or carried outright to the spot where Sally was working; she felt an actual pain in her chest at the pitiful sight some of them made as they tried—and failed—to make it across the clearing on their own. She quickly learned that the spragons who needed assistance to cross the clearing would be more challenging to cure. She soon became familiar with the sensation one gets when one climbs a ridge assuming it to be the whole mountain, exhausts oneself with the effort, congratulates oneself on the accomplishment—then learns that one has barely made it into the foothills. In this case, the problem was that the spragons not only needed multiple elixirs but that each sequential elixir could only be identified after the one before it had been administered.

Worst were the poor spragons who had to be not assisted but carried

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to the spot where Sally was working. These also had to be treated with multiple elixirs. However, instead of each subsequent elixir becoming identifiable in the wake of the previous one being administered, these had to be given from the outset in a very specific order: one mistake meant having to start all over. Sally engaged in a despairing, tedious, grim game of trial and error till Tasmira realized that, by tweaking the Ether a little, she could produce an aura around her subjects. Within that aura appeared characters she could read, but when she interpreted them for the others, the characters seemed cryptic indeed.

“Take the purple, then, if you dare
Add what lies ‘twixt fire and air
Mix sapphires and sunshine, then add flame
Add all colors to make whole again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked a befuddled (and therefore irritated) Habie.

“There’s nothing purple here at all,” said Sally. “Are you sure you’re seeing your characters right, or that you used the right spell?”

“Yes and yes,” replied Tasmira. “And it’s a spell that would interpret the problem in a way our minds can understand.”

“Mix sapphires with sunshine?” Mistra repeated, her face screwing up into a little frown as she tried to make sense of it. She petted the small spragon she had cradled in her arms as if to assure it they were working on the problem.

Habie considered the vessels that contained the elixirs. They were arrayed before Sally so they sat with the sapphire elixir to her right, followed by the emerald, ruby, diamond, and moonstone elixirs. “You know,” she said slowly. “We don’t have anything purple, but the sapphire stuff is blue, and the ruby stuff is red, and together they *make* purple.”

“That’s true,” said Mistra, still thinking. “‘What lies ‘twixt fire and air,’” she repeated, regarding the array. Suddenly, she brightened. “It’s a logic problem! Tasmira’s right: the message she got takes into account what we can grasp *and* what’s sitting right before our eyes.”

“So sapphire and ruby together first?” asked Sally, jumping excitedly onto the solution.

“Yes.”

She administered the two elixirs simultaneously. The ill spragon immediately began to breathe more easily. “Then what? ‘Twixt air and fire would kind of be a rainbow, wouldn’t it, like what the moonstone elixir looks like?”

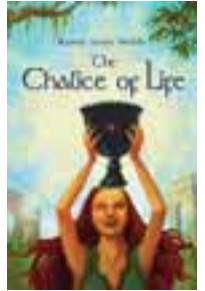
Mistra stopped her before she could proceed. “No. Look at the array. If fire is red—the ruby elixir—and air is the rainbow effect—the moonstones—then what lies between them is the diamond elixir.”

The archaeologist nodded understanding. “So some of it’s spatial, some of it’s inferential, some of it’s intuitive.”

“I think so.”

“Oh. Good.” Her tone was completely flat.

Putting their heads together, they interpreted the “sapphires and sunshine” line to mean the emeralds (figuring that sunshine was yellow and



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that blue and yellow made green), that the flame reference again meant the red ruby elixir, and that the “all colors” phrase again meant the rainbow effect of the moonstones. Roughly a minute after Sally had administered the final elixir, the spragon leapt from Mistra’s arms and took a fluttering tour of the glade. The good news was that they had learned to interpret Tasmira’s messages correctly.

The bad news was that that particular clue was the least equivocal hint the Queen was able to generate. But Sally and the others kept at it, treating their tiny charges even as the males in the party looked after Alla.

By evening, the ill spragons—even the spritely dragons, taking their cue from Tasmira, had adopted the name—were all recovering. The three women, cued by one of the visions Sally had seen in the undercity, had made a concoction of all five Elixirs to be used as a tonic for those who were not ill, so they had seen to keeping the healthy healthy as well as to curing the ill.

Sally, unused to mentalic contact as she was, had exhausted herself long before they finished, but she refused to surrender while there was a single spragon who needed their help. When they had finally done, she rose and started to walk across the clearing to the path that led back to their camp, then simply collapsed before she had reached the eaves of the forest. Mistra and Habie could not reach her in time to break her fall, but they were able to carry her to a quiet corner of the clearing where thick, springy turf grew in abundance.

“Boy, just when a big, strong man would come in handy,” Habie grumbled, panting a little from her exertions. “Trust ‘em to be lavishing their attentions on a woman at the exact moment you need their help!”

Tasmira smiled indulgently at the ersatz accusation, but she also took Habie’s point to heart. Summoning her ladies, she bade them use whatever skills they had, manual or magical, to round up enough small cushions to make a human-sized bed. The spragons could not truly levitate the amount of weight represented by even the slender archaeologist, but they could oppose gravity to the extent that Habie and Mistra perceived Sally’s weight as that of a small child rather than a full-grown adult. So, what with combining their various skills, they eventually got the archaeologist settled comfortably.

“But I see now,” Mistra remarked to Habie as Sally curled up on the makeshift bed. “It was important—it was eminently *logical*—that the person who administered the potions in Torreb’s absence be someone of this world, a true descendant of the people for whom the chalice was made, or someone highly in sympathy with them. *We* had to provide the material elements of the spell, but Sally had to be its conduit: within her being would be an innate grasp of what imbalances are here on Astra because this is her home. Home... ” she repeated softly, unsure if she had expounded for Habie’s benefit or her own, certain the thought of home was like a knife in her heart. She rubbed the spot between her brows where tension was suddenly mounting. She had been away from her home for so long.

At that, Habie slipped a sympathetic hand into Mistra’s. “Cheer up, pal. At the same time you gave up *your* home, you helped to *make* one for

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me.” The two exchanged a smile, then embraced.

“Why don’t you try to get some rest, too?” Mistra suggested as they watched the men continue to work on Alla.

“Are you kidding? I know the guys don’t look like they’re doing much, but there’s something in the air, something Big. Can’t you feel it?”

Mistra nodded. “That was why I was suggesting you try to get some rest while you can.”

“Hey, I’m younger, but I’m every bit the old campaigner you and Mosaia are—just in a different way.”

In the end, neither of them slept, but they rested, sitting back-to-back and taking comfort in each other’s company.

At last, just as the stars were coming out, the men began to rouse and move away from Alla as if Torreb had dismissed them one by one from the contact. First T’Cru rose, stretching, as felines will after a long catnap. Deneth followed, rising, slinging his lute over his shoulder, and stretching both his back and his hands: the Lay of Liandra would have presented a challenge to any bard in the cosmos by virtue of its length, but it also featured several passages of virtuoso instrumental work that challenged the most experienced fingers to remain untangled. Last came Mosaia, who stretched as Deneth had, then focused on the small knot of questors. His lips parted in a smile so delighted he may have actually been surprised that they had waited for him—either that or, lost in the contact, he had begun to think that they and the adventures they had shared with him had been naught but illusion.

“I could feel her life forces ebbing,” the paladin said, shaking his head sadly as he joined them, “though Torreb owns it not. It is beyond my skill to reverse the process; indeed, it seems beyond the skill of all of us put together.”

“Well, we must have overlooked something, then!” Habie fumed. “We can’t just leave her here to die. The spragons are alive because of her.”

“And because of *you*, little one. Without your sacrifice and your trust in Alla, the final elixir could not have been created.” Thinking she looked abashed at the praise, he reached down to ruffle the fur between her ears and was rewarded with a shy smile.

There followed about a minute of intensely active stillness during which all six of them cast about frantically to pinpoint some measure they had not yet tried.

“What about a temporal stasis bubble?” Mistra suggested abruptly. “It wouldn’t heal her, but it would keep her from deteriorating till we can find a cure.”

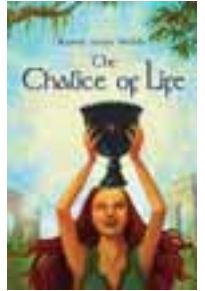
“You’re capable of such an enchantment?” asked Deneth, his interest keener than any of them would have expected: even a Thalacian would know that Carotians learned to handle spells of that magnitude as children.

“Oh, sure,” she replied off-handedly.

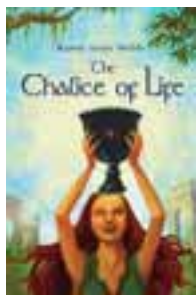
“And it’s something that would stand up to a little travel? It wouldn’t just go `poof’ when you tried to move it?”

“Not unless you planned to run your sword through it.”

“Then there is a way we can help her.” And he told them what



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Anthraticus' spell had shown them about the Portal Stone and, by implication, the Portals themselves.

It seemed that Deneth's fascination with the Stone had not been misplaced. It was, as he had remarked earlier, made of the very "bones of the earth." And so, it seemed, were the Portals. They had been formed at the dawn of time, when the raw elemental Powers of the cosmos had been strong. The Portals had been created from the stuff of those raw elements. They possessed no affinity for any particular pantheon of gods, but they did have a certain malleability of orientation: they could be affected by the touch of the hand of the Divine. Then, for a short time as the eons were reckoned, they might assume the aspect of the Being Who touched them. Thus, although Minissa's province was not specifically the healing arts, the influence of her kindly disposition and that of the Pantheon would lend great restorative powers to the twilight worlds, or interspaces, that lay beyond the Portals her hand had touched.

"Then the Portal itself might heal her?" asked Mosaia, his entire aspect brightening.

"Not the Portal," Deneth corrected, "at least, not proximity to the Portal itself, or our friend Postumus wouldn't have had to wait for us to come along and heal him. No, we must pass it first. At least, that's how I understand what we divined. Which I guess means we have to get her *to* the Portal..." He trailed off.

"It's OK," Mistra said, cutting into his reverie. "I'll just have to cast the spell now, and then remove it in the instant before we go through." She opened her mouth to continue, but then she, too, trailed off, perplexed.

Habie's brow knit into a frown. "Is it a real bubble?" she asked.

"Well, it's not made of soap, if that's what you mean."

"I mean, is it fragile? Assuming Deneth doesn't decide to skewer it with his sword?"

"It can be dispelled magically or broken by force, but it's not fragile the way a soap bubble would be. Why?"

"Because our ride here on board Postumus was a little bumpy, and I was wondering—well—how will you move her *onto* Postumus, assuming he's giving us a lift like he promised, and how you'll keep her secured once we're in the air."

Deneth looked like he was about to describe for her an obvious solution, then slouched without answering. It had obviously been a weak point in his idea.

"Can you make your bubble sprout wings or something?" She had been observing the spragons and the grace with which they flitted about the glade. "You know, like hummingbirds have, or butterflies."

"What?" Deneth asked, distracted.

"Nothing seems as light and gentle as a butterfly." Her voice was wistful. "At least, when it's flying. I don't know what they look like on the ground."

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“Oh, Habie,” groaned Mistra, “this is hardly the time—”

“Wait!” exclaimed Tasmira. “We do fly with more grace than our larger cousins.”

“You’re prettier, too,” said Deneth. “Bit academic, isn’t it?”

T’Cru, his entire aspect brightening, sat up and twitched his tail. “Not if her majesty is suggesting that *her* people rather than Postumus’ transport Alla.”

“But they’re so small!” he began, then cut himself off at a glare from Habie. “Well -er- I mean—”

“Yes,” agreed Tasmira, “we *are* small, so we have learned to work together to achieve that which it would take only one or two of our larger cousins to accomplish. Cast your spell, Princess of Caros. I and all my people will see that your friend arrives at this Portal safely. Her ride will be smooth and your bubble safe.”

Mistra’s face lit up, as did Deneth’s, Habie’s, Mosaia’s, and T’Cru’s. “Oh, thank you!” they chorused.

The clearing, so still till that moment, suddenly came alive with activity. Deneth and Mosaia ran off to hail Postumus and collect all of their belongings. T’Cru stood ready to push Torreb out of the contact as soon as Mistra loosed the spell. Of all of them, the priest alone had remained oblivious to the conversation: he could not spare the attention for them to explain their solution to him, and they needed him to maintain Alla’s tenuous grip on life till the instant before the spell took effect.

Mistra put a hand to her brow, closed her eyes, and focused the energies she needed to work the spell. She chanted a quick prayer to Minissa. At the same time, slowly, she raised her other arm and pointed her index finger at Alla’s heart. As she finished her prayer, she felt her whole body tense. The surge of power came; the Ether bent.

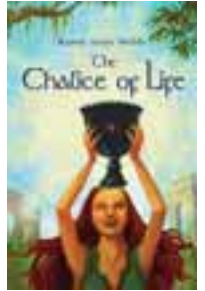
“Now, T’Cru!” she called as the magical energy crackled from her outstretched finger. Just in time! There was a crack like the report of lightning, and for a brief second the glade pulsed with a blue light. The light intensified, then coalesced around Alla’s body. The spragons whom Tasmira had summoned were obliged to turn away lest they be blinded.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the flash of brilliance was gone. Alla floated gently into the air. She stopped when she was about a meter off the ground, surrounded by a soft nimbus of white light.

Torreb’s jaw dropped. “By Cilio’s slide rule!” It was all he could say for a moment, and no one could really better the statement. Mistra might have been a bit blasé about her ability to cast the spell, but there was no denying the way it dazzled those who had never seen a true display of the Art Inborn. But Mistra seemed to take no notice of the way her small audience stood gaping. She merely strode forward to satisfy herself that her spell had worked properly.

Torreb, wide-eyed, stood and reached out a hand to Alla. It bounced back as though it had contacted a balloon. “I’m glad you’re on *my* side,” he remarked. “Temporal stasis bubble?”

“Uh-huh. Sorry for the rude awakening—it was necessary that you stay with her till the last instant. We’re taking her back to the Portal.” And she



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explained quickly what Deneth had related to them.

“Good job it was he that Anthraticus ran afoul of, then, and that he picked that spell as the way the little fellow could make amends.” He returned his gaze to Alla. “She looks so serene. Her mind had so many pockets of turbulence amidst the quiet, and that quiet was like a dead calm.”

She pressed his hand in a show of understanding, then said, “Come on. We have one more matter of urgency to discuss before we leave this place.”

They reached the Portal just as the sun rose. Nearly all of Tasmira’s people had made the journey, working in shifts so that they could keep pace with the larger dragons on which the other questors flew. The only one who was absent, and that conspicuously, was Anthraticus—even Deneth could not tell them where his companion had gotten to after Alla’s ritual had begun. That they had not been able to find the small creature saddened the whole party. It was due to his labors with Deneth that they had discovered a means of preserving Alla’s life, and they had at least wanted to take their proper leave of him.

The Elixirs had worked well: the now-healed dragons exulted in their renewed ability to fly. Postumus led the procession, riderless, while seven of his smaller companions of varying hues served as steeds for the adventurers. They found an older, more staid aqua-colored dragon for Sally, but the others rode younger ones who frisked and dived and played tag as they flew.

The entire party made landfall before the cave in which the Portal lay. The ten spragons carrying Alla hovered before the cave mouth while the adventurers took their leave of Postumus and the others.

“We have no fitting way to thank you,” said Postumus. “Alas! If your friend’s need had not been so pressing, you might have stayed and had your pick of treasure from any of our hoards. But at least let me give you this.” He flexed one wing. Out of a fold of skin dropped an amethyst the size of Mosaia’s palm. “There were no amethysts in the caverns, and I find that passing strange, for on our world they are considered the most magical and lucky of stones, though they are rare. This one is many-faceted and of rich color and fine quality. It is an heirloom of my house. May it bring you fortune on your quest!”

They accepted the stone gladly—and mostly graciously, although Deneth muttered something about needing all the luck they could get. Then the six questors exchanged glances as though they all knew they had something more to say but were uncertain who should say it.

Torreb finally nominated himself. “I have left you most of the elixirs we made,” he said to the dragons. “You should have no lack for ages to come. As you saw, it takes but a drop to cure the illnesses your folk had. But the chalice itself—we felt that it and its powers should remain here, to be shared with the peoples of *your* world, much as we would like to take it along with us.” Now speaking with a diffidence that was nevertheless

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engaging, he turned to Sally. "The power I gave you to use the chalice and the Elixirs of Life will last as long as you use it for the common weal; now that the crisis has passed, I think you will find that the necessary fluids can be contributed by anyone. We discussed it among ourselves. We want to leave the chalice in your care. What human on Astra has a better right to it? Even if my vision had not suggested your relationship to Queen Zargirt's family, even if I misinterpreted what I saw, who else could more fairly be called her most true spiritual descendent? But we must have your word that you won't shut it up in a museum where its powers will never be used: they are too precious to waste."

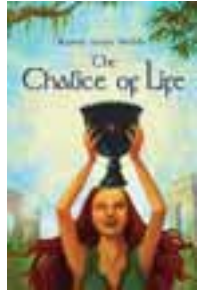
Moving as one in a dream, Sally took the chalice between her hands. Her mouth worked a bit, although no sound came out; for a moment, she could only stare as if seeing both her hands and the chalice for the first time. Then both hands and vessel blurred into fuzzy translucence as her eyes filled with grateful tears. She had not realized the extent to which Torreb had been empowering her when he had stopped her putting that first moonstone into the chalice.

"This is what I've been waiting for my whole professional life," she got out between the sobs, "what I came to the dig to find: the Chalice of Life. A find like this comes once in a career, and that with luck!" She sniffed, wiped away a tear. "I came here looking for an archaeological treasure of such magnitude it would shake my world to its foundations, but I meant in an *historical* sense: I had no idea the chalice's powers would be real! And I believe you when you say I'm a descendent of the Hamani, of Zargirt herself. I've often wondered if that was the source of my fascination with Zargirt's era, of my attraction to the chalice and the time period in which it was created and all that it and Zargirt stood for. I don't quite know what to say.

"If I take it back, I'll get the credit for the find, but the actual ownership will revert to the university. And if they don't shut up in a museum, they'll turn it over to a laboratory where scientists in sterile white coats will take it apart and analyze it and put it through tests that may well destroy it. And if they don't end up destroying it outright, they *will* lock it up in such a way that no one will ever be able to gain access to it for the purpose for which the monks of Qirith-Nar created it.

"I'd have *my* name made, of course." She shrugged. "And a week ago—two days ago!—that's all that would have mattered. That *is* all that mattered to me half the time we were poking about the undercity, till those visions started clobbering me over the head. But that's all changed now—you changed all that for me. Don't you see?"

"My only other real alternative if you give it to me would be to hide it, doling out the elixirs on the sly and doing what my folk call 'practicing medicine without a license.' Or I guess I could hand it over to the dominant church. The authorities would enshrine it, and that wouldn't be so bad, but it would be tended by priests who have no more idea how to administer its gifts than how to fly to the moons." She grinned ruefully at the follies of her own culture and shook her head. "You don't know how much I want this, or how much it means to me that you offered to leave it in my care." She



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pursed her lips, blinked away the last of her tears, clutched the chalice to her breast as she might a wounded bird. The others wondered if her actions would belie her words, or if her brain had made a decision it had not yet communicated to her unyielding arms.

And then, with the force of an elastic band snapping in two, she was thrusting the chalice back into Torreb's hands. "But no—I can't take it." She sniffled again; from somewhere, someone produced a handkerchief, which she accepted gratefully. "It's not that I'm not appreciative of your offer. It's just that—well, my world isn't ready for magic yet. At least, the human world isn't. You saw what a hard sell *I* was, and I'm a starry-eyed romantic at heart: who else but a starry-eyed romantic would have thought the Hamani empire ended in triumph rather than tragedy? But the rest of the human world thinks it's too advanced, too civilized, to believe in magic, the way I thought before I met you: it could never accept a beneficial magic like this without first seeking to analyze it to within an inch of its life. And whether I keep it or surrender it to the university or the church, as long as the chalice stays in the human world, I couldn't swear it would remain in the hands of those who would *not* seek to pervert its use as the Hamani once did. Our technology probably seems completely primitive to you, but even so, our sense of ethic or morality has not been able to keep pace with it. No law that we could pass anywhere on Astra would prevent a person whose heart was twisted from procuring the chalice for himself and learning the secret of using it to end life rather than to preserve it. When all is said and done, I don't know that even our priests are any better than those kings and queens of the Hamani who first hoarded its treasure and then turned its virtues to evil.

"I'll never, *ever* forget the past forty-eight hours, or you, or all you've taught me, or all I've learned just by sharing in this adventure with you. But leave the chalice to the dragons. They understand. They'll see that it's used properly."

Postumus nodded his great head. "So let it be," he said. "The dragons will guard this great treasure, but on one condition. Do not let the lore of this thing die now that it has been unearthed! Tell your children and your children's children! And if ever you or yours are in need of the chalice and its virtues, come to us and you will be welcome. We will keep it as a trust, to be shared and finally surrendered to humanity when it is ready and able—when it is *worthy*—to accept such gifts."

As Torreb handed the chalice to Postumus, the questors exchanged a glance with one another: an outside observer might have concluded that Mistra was asking without words, "Does everyone still agree?" and that the rest were encouraging her to proceed. All six of them had been deeply moved by Sally's speech about the unsuitability of her own people to be custodians for the chalice, by the very selflessness it had taken to refuse their offer: if any human on Astra had a right to it, it was she. But something in the way that glance traversed their small circle said they had not only anticipated her response but made a contingency plan to cover it.

Now Mistra stepped forward. "There are those," she said, "who say that one fundamental law of the universe is that no good deed goes

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unpunished. In the Union, our gods teach us otherwise, though they also teach that the reward that is sweet as the choicest honey may seem like the most bitter gall when we first receive it. I learned on my Dreamquest that, though the gods sometimes do reward our sacrificial acts, the acts in themselves should be reward enough, and we should in no wise expect anything further. But sometimes they reward us anyway.

"We are no gods, but in memory of your great heart and the adventures you have shared with us, we would see you make your name." She quirked a smile at her friends and indicated them with a nod. "I know something of what such things mean to a scientist, even if *they* don't." She turned to Habie, who had produced one of each of the gems. Postumus must have understood her intent, for, as Mistra took the gems from Habie and set them floating in the air before her, he held up the chalice so she might use the genuine artifact as her guide.

She molded her hands around the gems as if she were cupping the chalice, or defining it without benefit of visual cues, and bent her head in concentration. Seconds later, an exact copy of the chalice materialized inside the circle formed by the gems. And there it hovered while she spoke.

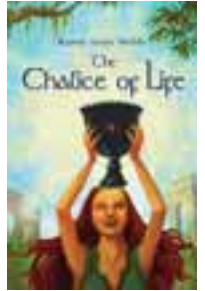
"There you are," she said to Sally. "It will stand up to any test your people have for authenticity, even dating techniques. It isn't magical, but it will solve the moral dilemma we suspected we might be thrusting on you when we offered you the real one."

At that, Sally's face lit. Giddy as a schoolgirl, she took the ersatz chalice and hugged it joyfully to her breast. Then she embraced them each in turn; when Postumus offered her a lift back to her camp, she vaulted onto his back with the sort of exuberance that told them she thought she could get used to this kind of thing.

The end of Sally's story was far better than the beginning. The escort of dragons of every description, coupled with the presentation of the chalice to her comrades, did earn her quite a name. The chalice, as she had predicted, reverted to the ownership of her university, where scientists did subject it to a battery of tests. Satisfied of its period and authenticity as a true Hamani artifact, the university's board of governors made it the centerpiece of their archaeological collection. No one thought to try to use it for the purpose for which the monks had created it, and no one could have gotten anywhere near it if he had.

So pleased were the university authorities with Sally's performance that they advanced her rank, offered her immediate tenure, and even allowed her to take the chalice on tour occasionally when she lectured about the circumstances that had led to its recovery. Yielding to expediency and fudging the truth for the first and only time in her professional life, she readily accepted their offer.

In the years that followed, she did indeed visit the dragons from time to time and make use of the real chalice for the occasional urgent need of her family and colleagues. In fact, she and her children and her children's



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children became frequent visitors to the draconian and spragonian colonies, and it was to one of her great-granddaughters that the dragons finally surrendered the chalice. In that time, the humans of Astra finally attained the maturity both to use the chalice with the wisdom of a sage and to accept its gifts with the openness of heart a child. But in her own time, Sally became quite famous, and well-known for her broad-mindedness, her courage, her love of adventure, and her reluctance ever to refer to a novel or unpopular idea as “silly.”

As Postumus vaulted into the sky, Torreb led the way into the cavern. The rest followed, first forming a circle around Alla’s bubble so they could propel it along using only the lightest of pressure from their outstretched hands. A tense silence ensued as they drew to a halt before the Portal. “We’ll have to move quickly once I dispel the bubble,” Mistra said at last. “Everybody ready?”

A moment of active silence as they all gave their packs a final, perfunctory once over, followed by a chorus of nervous “OK”’s. Everyone was suddenly looking at everyone else in a way that said he felt closer to the rest than at any time since they had come together that strange day in Tuhl’s wood. It was Habie who made the first truly productive move. She took Deneth’s hand, and that set up a chain reaction whereby everyone grasped the hand or arm or shoulder of the person next to him. Forming a complete circle in this way left everyone with a free hand (or tail): these they placed on the bubble in such a way that, when Mistra released her spell, their free hands would come to rest in the air above Alla’s body. Torreb chanted a short invocation for blessings from the entire Pantheon, then nodded to Mistra to proceed.

Mistra closed her eyes, drew a deep breath, and focused her will. The glow surrounding Alla vanished, but something about the way they had placed their hands kept her airborne. With a collective deep breath, they stepped forward.

They had less a sense of entering the Portal than having the Portal reach out to engulf them. Around them fell a darkness punctuated by coruscating lights. Sight did little to orient them, nor did sound or their sense of direction, for their feet found purchase on nothing: they might have been floating weightless in space. Whether they moved ahead at the speed of light or remained motionless, none of them could have said. Of two things only were they aware: the way the null space throbbed with the power of the primal force that had shaped the universe on that great Day so long ago, and the way their handholds on Alla and on one another kept them aware of the connection they shared.

Sensing that connection, they roused themselves. Deneth’s voice knifed through the void. “Now, Torreb! Call her back!”

Torreb started to say that he could not, that he was too overwhelmed by the sheer rush of untamed force swirling past his mind. But a tingling at his left shoulder brought him to himself at the point where he felt himself

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to be in imminent danger of being sucked into the starry maelstrom and lost forever. Suddenly, he was aware of himself— Torreb, priest of Ereb, chosen of Minissa. And out of the vast emptiness beyond the whirling lights, a form appeared: the magnificent head and rack and ruff of the Stag. The Pantheon was with him. He could feel the power of each one of those divine beings touch him with the gentleness of a sweet breeze in summer and the tempestuous might of a hurricane.

“Alla,” he called softly. “Alla.” He had to make out her face and brow by touch. He massaged her temples gently as he probed with his mind for some sign of her consciousness. There was no spell or technique he had ever learned to cover this set of circumstances, but he thought he heard Ereb’s voice guiding him, encouraging him, assuring him that he took no liberty with her soul, as Bronys had not yet called it to him. He heard other voices echoing in his mind—those of his quest friends calling to him and telling him to draw on their individual strengths as well as on the strength of the fusion they were just beginning to form. He could feel their strengths wash over him: Mosaia’s raw physical might, Deneth’s wit, T’Cru’s dignity, Habie’s exuberance, Mistra’s sheer brilliance of spirit. Even the silly Retributor was there with him, contributing its own best quality of steadfastness. Together, they reached for Alla: they became his hands beckoning her home. Together they told her she was a part of them without which they would remain forever incomplete. Together they formed the markers of a path that led her back to knowledge of and communion with her own Self.

Abruptly, the voices, the lights, the caresses stopped. All became dark and silent. Torreb felt completely numb. Then he was given cause to sigh in relief, for he heard Alla speak into the void.

“Did it work?” she asked with weary good humor.

Everyone gasped.

Everyone exhaled.

Then everyone cheered.

—

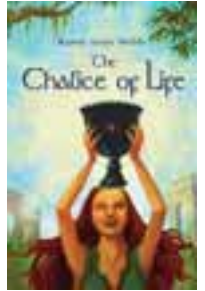
A filtered green light opened about them: a calm, peaceful sort of light. As it grew, they saw that they were standing in a grassy dell. A spring bubbled up in its center. On one side was what could only have been the egress from the interspace: a lintel with a carving of the Stag at its apex. Beyond the dell lay Nothing.

Deneth flopped on the ground beside Alla. “Welcome back,” he greeted. “Looks like we can take a minute to catch our breaths. I’d say, in fact, that this calls for a celebration.”

“Hear, hear,” Mosaia agreed. He joined the others on the ground. He couldn’t remember ever having felt so exhausted.

“I hope the Portal hasn’t soured the wine and the ale,” said Habie.

“Or blunted the edge of my culinary skills,” said Mistra. She pulled from her pack a package of hardtack and held it aloft. “I think I can tweak the Ether a bit and make this come out as some sort of freshly-baked



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pastry. Requests?"

The question netted her a delighted chorus of suggestions for everything from croissants to *pain au chocolat*, so Mistra busied herself conjuring and altering and bending the Ether into knots while Deneth foraged for the remains of the wine and ale. Mosaia, rifling in his pack, came up with a treasure he had never noticed before: a pipe with a long, straight stem of wood and a small, flat bowl made of a marbled red stone. With it went a packet of leaf that was not tobacco. Alla was the first to identify it as *elemangora* or mindsweet, an herb used by her folk on social occasions to knit the hearts and unite the spirits and on ritual occasions to open the gates of the Sight. That was sufficient explanation for the rest. Mosaia filled the pipe and lit it, took a few puffs and passed it on.

Soon they were feasting and laughing and joking together as if they had been adventuring together for years rather than days. They learned much about one another that they had initially shied from inquiring about for fear of giving offense. They learned of one another's races—Alla's folk, for instance, formed small communal groups to raise their young, and could only conceive and give birth in their primary animal forms. They learned of one another's worlds—Deneth revealed that, on Thalas, a favored uncle often took it upon himself to initiate his nephews into the mysteries of certain aspects of manhood, and that special houses of ill fame existed for precisely this purpose. And they learned a little more about one another as individuals—Habie, for example, told them that she had eluded capture in a society of receptive empaths more by never *feeling* guilty than by never *being* guilty. In fact, she had usually felt entirely justified in her thefts and so had eluded what she referred to as the "thought police."

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It was in this milieu of fellowship that Mistra finally opened her heart fully to her companions. Prompted by Deneth and supported largely by his reassuring presence, she ventured into the waters that were no less treacherous for her having had a part in their creation.

"I will have no secrets from the rest of you," she began, adding, "at least, none that might impact the quest," with a pointed glance at Deneth. "I know some of you have heard the rumors about my supposed death and miraculous resurrection." She waited for the nods of encouragement to run their course. "And I'm sure you wrote it off as something foolish, or strange or unusual even for the Union." She took a very deep breath and exhaled heavily before she continued. "The man I traveled with was my consort. We had come home to ask the formal permission of the court to marry."

She took a deep breath; when she continued, it was clear from the look in her eyes that she had traveled to another time, another place. "I had discovered the Stag on my shoulder some weeks before. In fact, I had had an intimation that I was needed at home during our travels about then. Our craft—it was capable of travel in time as well as space—had gotten yanked off course as we made a temporal jump. All we could ever learn of the spot we ended up in was that, for that world, it was a place where many holy

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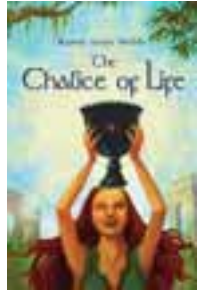
men had arisen—prophets, I guess you would call them, such as we used to have in the Union and I think such as Falidia still produces from time to time.” She noticed peripherally that Mosaia’s ears pricked up almost visibly at her phrasing. “In a garden so beautiful and peaceful it was like landing in the Home of Homes itself, a man beckoned to me. He was not like I imagined a prophet to be, but like one who walks in the shadow of a prophet that lives. He took me to a figure he said was his father, and I knew I had come into the Presence of one whose spirit was made of other than mortal substance.” She brushed away a few tears at the memory. “I have only felt such a Presence on those occasions that one of the Pantheon has favored me with a visit.

“I fell at his feet in tears. He told me to tell him the sorrows of my heart, as if I could have had anything at all to say that could have been of interest to such a one as that! But I did. I started, and I just couldn’t stop. I told him about all the trouble I had ever been in at school or at home or on tour with the ballet company, how many people I’d put out on Caros and now in the galaxy at large—how I felt I’d really *been* nothing but trouble since the day my soul had come forth from the Void. That was the one time he smiled a little in the whole recitation, as if he were saying my soul had come forth from the Void in a time and place I knew nothing about, and didn’t I just not know the half of it. When I had finished, he said only that a life so lived must have been one of great preparation and that I must return home soon, for Minissa would have need of me.

“None of it—not the Stag, not this strange meeting—changed our plans, though. For all I knew, Minissa needed me to go use some flashy pyrotechnics on the Dantonians so they’d swear to quit making war on their hapless neighbors, and I would be done and home in a week and life would go on. But shortly after we returned to Caros, my consort was enchanted into a deep sleep and I was called to a secret meeting. All the brass of the Union were there, though I’d been away long enough that I was unfamiliar with some of them, like Deneth’s boss Lord Eck. I am no diviner, but they stoked a fire in the hearth and tossed in a few grains of the Dust of Caros and asked me to tell them what I saw. And what I saw was Eliander and the story—the *true* story—of how he had been catapulted by magic from Thalasia, possibly even from this universe. I saw glimmerings that told me about all of you, too, as well as the places we’ll be visiting—that’s how we knew how many questors to expect, and how many Portals there are between home and Eliander.

“When I was finished, the Thalacian embassy all but prostrated itself at my feet and told the rest gathered there that they were sorry they had doubted. ‘Doubted what?’ I asked. That was when they told me about the quest. My best argument against their interpretation was that a role like this was something usually reserved for children born in a certain birth order. That’s the third child of two third children,” she clarified for Mosaia’s benefit. “I think places where they have larger families, it’s more like the seventh child of one seventh child.”

Torreb frowned as if he were adding numbers in his head. “But your father is only a second child.”



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She shook her head. “That was what *I* thought, too. That night is when I learned otherwise. Our family has been dogged by tragedy these past two generations as a result of a vendetta by a man who suffered Abrogation and was eventually banished from court. My father’s older brother, who died before he could come to the throne, was one of a set of twins. The other twin died at birth.” She shrugged. “The popular belief about Caros is that childbirth always goes smoothly and all children survive to adulthood. It’s a good rule of thumb, but it has its exceptions!

“Anyway, after they shot down *that* argument, I said yes, fine, I’d go, my consort and I would be off in the morning to the rendezvous in Tuhl’s wood. That’s when they *really* lowered the boom. He had not been marked by the goddess.” She touched the spot on her shoulder where the Stag lay. “Ariane said they had researched and researched but all they could find is that, while those elected to a quest like this *may* fall by the wayside by mischance, no one who has ever attempted to go without being the specific designee of the Pantheon has ever survived. If my consort tried to come along, he would die.”

Something in the way she smiled wanly and shook her head suggested she was simultaneously suppressing tears and looking to the universe for strength. “If my consort had a fault, it was that he either thought himself invincible or acted as if he *were* invincible without enumerating the belief that underpinned it. His kind were very long-lived; they had the ability to regenerate tissue after an injury, sometimes their entire body if life failed, so maybe there was something to his belief, but...” She felt her throat close, heard her voice grow husky. “I was unwilling to let him take that chance. I was unwilling to *chance* that he would take the chance—by sweet Arayne, the love I bore that man!—because I knew that, even with the evidence laid out before him, he would write it off as anecdotal nonsense unworthy of a scientist’s notice. He would have followed me, and what Ariane and the Council and the entire assemblage feared would have come true. He would have died.

“So several of us devised a ruse. The monarchs were in on it, as was Tuhl. My consort and I rode out to visit Tuhl—Tuhl took quite a fancy to him!—and on the way back, I had a conveniently staged accident. To all appearances, I was killed in a rockslide. That was what made the news holos. But I was hustled back to the castle, whole and in secret. What my consort mourned over was a well-made replicant. He grieved; still grieving, he left Caros to lose himself in the torturous paths of time and space. My chances of ever seeing him again are—remote.”

“But how could he doubt that you lived with the bond in place?” Torreb sputtered. “Only the two involved in either the consort or the marriage bond can ever sever it unless death take one of them!”

Her expression as good as said, “Well, I saw *that* one coming, and from that exact direction.” It had been hard enough to explain this to Deneth alone; it was no easier to get the words out a second time, especially before the entire party. She took another, even deeper breath. “The Nonacle of the entire Union broke it, at the moment of my supposed demise. They were gathered at the site of the rockslide, the site we had agreed on and sent

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the replicant to.” She looked heavenward; the tears came, but she spoke through them. “In case you’re wondering why my behavior is erratic at times, or why—”

“What?!” Torreb exclaimed, somewhat belatedly. It had taken the extra two sentences for his sense of moral outrage to catch up with what his ears had just told him. He interrupted her with such explosive force that not only Mistra but the entire camp circle snapped their heads around to stare. “Mistra! You’re saying that the most sacred Institution in the Union tampered with one of the most sacred bonds of the spirit our people ever forge. This is unthinkable! This is monstrous! This is—” He groped for the words.

“Necessary?” Mistra suggested.

He shook his head. His face was a mask of disbelief.

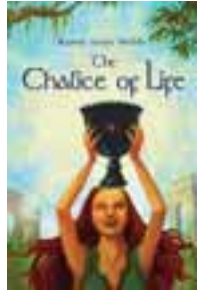
“I gave my consent, Torreb, once the decision had been reached. We could hardly have asked my consort for his as well.”

“But tampering with someone’s mind uninvited is a gross violation of the Ethic: an individual would face Abrogation if anyone learned of it.”

“Do you think for one minute I don’t know how serious a violation it was?” she snapped, seeing his point but wishing he would just let it go. She felt Deneth slip his hand into hers and squeeze. “If we didn’t have the Ethic, if we didn’t stand in fear of violating it, then every person weaker in the Art or the Disciplines would be in constant danger of being exploited—of having his thoughts manipulated, or his heart, or of being made sport of—by every person who was stronger. But what do you do when bowing to the Ethic means standing by and watching someone you love go unwittingly to his death? Which is the higher law?” Her voice sank to the whisper of a wounded child. “I asked them to make the severance on his side of the bond as clean as possible, no matter what it left me with in terms of ragged edges. I needed the fiction of my death to survive from his viewpoint.”

She shook her head. “If there was a price to pay for overstepping the dictates of the Ethic, I’ve paid it in full. I still have nightmares about the rockslide, and I feel the edges of my psyche like tatters on an aged shroud: they are my constant companions. I know first-hand what the severance of death feels like because my first consort was murdered.” She gave them a little graveyard laugh. “As bad as *that* was, I wish *this* were that good.” She felt Deneth slip his arm around her shoulder and did not resist when he tugged.

“I’m sorry, Mistra,” Torreb said after a moment. “I reacted badly and spoke without thinking: it’s one of my worst faults. It’s just that it’s drilled into our heads from the time we’re born that the mind is a sacred place that no one enters without permission from the owner. Why do you think the average Carotian or Erebite on the street spends so much time learning the discipline to tune out the thoughts of others? When you train for the priesthood, you have to prove beyond all doubt that you’ve mastered that basic discipline before they’ll even let you attempt the sort of mindtouch that would allow you to heal a scratch. As priests, our contacts with the people we heal are so intimate as to defy pursuit by any but the most disciplined minds. The Ethic is all we have. If we were to decide to



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manipulate someone by virtue of information we picked up in a mentalic contact, or to blackmail him, no one would ever be able to say for certain where and when and how we picked the information up.”

“I understand. By the gods, by Arayne herself, I understand! Two months ago, I’d have reacted in exactly the same way if someone had told me it had happened to him. But now...” She retreated into humor to defuse the tension, but that humor had a bitter undercurrent. “If our theology allowed for the possibility of past lives, I’d think I was living a life of atonement for a life in which I intentionally used my gifts to wreck every happy marriage or consortium I came across.”

“You destroyed others’ happiness in love, so now your every chance of happiness is destroyed by the Pantheon, or by your bad acts coming back to you or some such thing?” Deneth asked, volumes of skepticism showing in his voice.

She sighed. “I know it sounds melodramatic, but there are days when I feel a man might as well take a viper to his bosom as to love me.” She emitted a mirthless laugh. “Gentlemen, consider yourselves forewarned!”

“Perhaps,” Mosaia ventured, and he wore the look of an outsider daring to trespass, of a wild horse venturing into the territory of a herd not his own, “there is reason in what you have suffered. Perhaps your gods spare you for some greater achievement, for some other end in which your consorts were never meant to play a part.” From another, it would have been a platitude. From Mosaia, it came out as the well-considered perspective of a caring friend.

“Are you suggesting a questmate might court Mistra and survive where a lesser man failed?” Deneth asked drily. It netted him a laugh and a warm look from Mistra.

“I think it was a very brave thing you did, Mistra,” said Alla.

“Me, too,” admitted Torreb. “Brave and honorable. I’m sorry I misspoke, Mistra. I understand—intellectually, at least—that you take a person’s very soul in your hands when you form that intimate a bond with him. It is a grave responsibility, and I was being short-sighted to suggest you hadn’t applied the Ethic in the way that would best preserve the life and sanity of the man you loved.”

“Good thing it wasn’t me,” added Habie. “I’d have let him come along and take his chances.” It elicited a much-needed laugh.

“Will you seek for him when we return?” asked Mosaia once the fit of mirth had run its course.

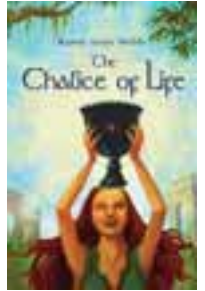
“*If* we return,” she corrected. “The thought that I might really die along the way when I accepted the quest was one of the things that made the entire ruse bearable.” She lowered her gaze to the ground. “No, I don’t think I *will* seek for him, not unless we return to find we’ve only been gone a day or two in realtime. I think if Isildin—that was my first consort, the one who was murdered—had popped up hale and whole six months or a year or five years after his death,” she said with a brittle laugh, “I’d have killed him all over again for appearing just as I was getting over his demise and putting the pieces back together. You see how inconstant I am, not at all like the great heroines of legend! Anyway, if I seem at all a little frayed

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around the edges and snappish, please chalk it up to that—well, that and the *tal-yosha* showing up a year ahead of schedule. And feel free to put me in my place.”

“Your place,” Deneth said in her ear, but loudly enough that the others heard as well, “is here.”

Warmth flooded her as the others closed round and offered agreement. Her tears, when they came again, were tears of relief and joy, and she felt herself richly blessed by Minissa to have been given such steadfast companions.



As they prepared to bed down for the night, Deneth let out a shriek that brought the rest of the camp running. It was followed by a string of mild expletives, then by hearty laughter.

“What have we here?” he chortled as he pulled from his pack the last thing he had expected. Instead of a wineskin or a sleeping roll, instead of soap or raiment or a toothbrush, he held in his hand a blue reptilian tail. He kept on pulling till the blue reptilian tail was followed by a violet reptilian underbelly, two small wings the color of purple velvet, and finally an upside-down blue face in which was set a toothy grin.

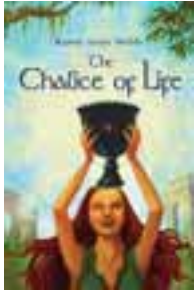
“Anthraticus?” Deneth gasped, yanking him completely out of his pack and holding him up by the tail.

Anthraticus half-opened one eye. “Hi!” he greeted merrily. The gales of laughter that followed were suddenly cut off by a series of intractable hiccoughs.

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“O DWELLERS OF MY PARADISE!

With the hands of loving kindness I have planted in the holy garden of paradise the young tree of your love and friendship, and have watered it with the goodly showers of My tender grace; now that the hour of its fruiting is come, strive that it may be protected, and not consumed with the flame of desire and passion.”

—The Book of Life

The Chamber of the Nonacle of the entire Carotian Union stood empty save for two figures, both of whom stood staring into the huge gazing crystal. Within lay a scene that showed clearly the arrival of the party in the interspace and Alla’s recovery.

“Phase one accomplished,” Avador observed. “They should be secure for a few hours now.” At a wave of his hand, the image winked out. “You’ll probably think less of my acumen as a ruler, but I was really wishing I could jump in and give them a hand with Alla there at the end.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Oh, well. Maybe it’s better I had no means of getting myself there.”

Ariane flashed him a smile. “I can hardly think less of a king who takes the well-being of his subjects so to heart, but—yes, if you’d shown up with

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all guns blazing, so to speak, and single-handedly yanked Alla back from the brink of death, they might never have made the connection between the Portals and the interspaces and their ability to heal. If, in fact, it was a condition your talents could have healed at all." She chortled. "But your aspirations are far more noble than mine! You wanted to save a life. All I wanted to do was get in there and give those pirates a sound beating."

Avador chuckled. "Listen to us! If we were acting in character, I'd have been the one wanting to get in there and clobber the pirates, and *you'd* have been the one elbowing people out of the way to get a crack at the puzzle the chalice presented them."

"Then I suppose it's for the best that *they're* doing that and *we're* doing this."

They regarded each other solemnly the space of three heartbeats, then rebutted her suggestion together with a simultaneous "Nah!"

Sobering, he heaved a sigh. "Sometimes my crown sits heavily upon my head."

She threw a sympathetic arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm feeling weighed down by mine as well. I thought the day we took office I'd gotten the thirst for adventure out of my system! Seeing my sister and her friends struggle makes me want to take up my sword, jump in the nearest shuttle, and race back out into the cosmos to pick up the fight where we left off."

"I think what you really want is to join Mistra, or to take her place."

"Let's not get carried away." She kept a straight face for all of two seconds before she burst out laughing. "OK, I admit it. That's *exactly* what I want."

"Me, too," he chuckled. "Don't you hate it when the Pantheon takes a job and awards it to someone else when you *know* you're the better candidate?"

"Absolutely." She sobered. "Really, they *could* have picked a better time to send my sister gallivanting through space with three such eligible men. I *really* feel for her when I think of that. I've only gone through one *tal-yosha* without you. It was no picnic, and I was able to absent myself from my male friends when the yearning became unendurable."

"It was kind of fun *with* me, though, wasn't it? Tell the truth."

She smiled seductively and loosened the lacings at the throat of his tunic. "Do I hear a suggestion in there that we keep in practice for the next time it strikes?"

"Oh... yes." He stole a gaze at the dark crystal. "It *was* my contention that they'd be OK for the next few hours."

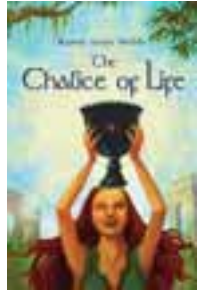
"It was." She pressed a little closer.

"And that, by implication, no one should have to check up on them for at least that much time."

"Mm-hmm." Even closer.

"And I'm never wrong about such things."

"No. Never." Any closer and she would have been standing behind him. She lifted her eyes to his.



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He found her look of complete innocence so seductive that he almost ravished her on the spot.

Ereb paced in his garden, then looked up at the sole other occupant of the place. Where Ereb looked like a warrior in the prime of life, his companion was dressed in the flowing formal robes of a declaiming bard. If the companion did not look completely divine, he definitely looked like he belonged on this side of the Veil: it may have had something to do with the three sets of wings. These were downy, like swans' wings, but were colored like his robes in the moss green and gold that marked his service to the god of justice and war in a righteous cause.

"My wife and cousins have provided the High Monarchy the means to watch over the quest," said Ereb. "Minissa chose a very enterprising group of adventurers for this task. No doubt they will rise to meet every challenge their quest will entail. Still, the watchers themselves..." He paused to frame his thoughts. "The High King and Queen are likely, I think, to take too great an interest in the quest. They were adventurous souls before their coronation, and I daresay a combination of familial concern and pining for the life they are no longer free as private persons to indulge may lead them to actions which are, while well-motivated, rash."

"How can I be of service to my lord?"

"Keep an eye on them, would you?—*all* of them, but the King and Queen most of all. It would not do to have Eliander rescued while the High Monarchs are both killed off before they can produce an heir, hmm?"

"My lord is a warrior and judge, but he has the wisdom of Caros and the statecraft his servant might have expected from a scholar like Cilio." He put a hand to his breast and bowed.

"I give you what latitude you need, my beloved son. Intervene where and when you think fit, and do not feel you must answer to anyone but me."

"I think my lord also shows the qualities of the merciful lady Arayne in this."

"And perhaps my reasons are all my own. Run along."

The creature sprinted off, leaving in his wake a trail of stardust.

But while Avador and Ariane, Ereb and his minion were occupied in this wise, still others were observing the band of questors and scheming. Although their scrying device could not penetrate the interspace, they knew that the plucky little band had completed its first task.

"Will you help them if the woman succumbs?" Lilith asked.

"They do not yet seem to be in need of my help, my dear," Syndycyr replied. He circled the crystal, almost as wide as he was tall, and tried a few manipulations that might improve its ability to penetrate such a dimension. The crystal sat on a golden claw and, when it was activated, gave a 360° view of its subject so scrying through it was like watching

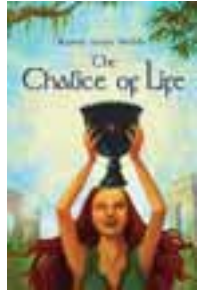
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theatre in the round. It dominated the small room that housed it.

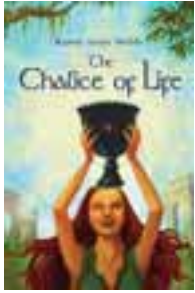
Failing in his task, he continued, "You and I both also know how desperate their plight would have to be before they would call on me for help, even if they had the means in hand. They are all—" Here he made a face, as if the words tasted bitter. "—essentially good folk, even the bard and the thief, and none of them is naive enough to believe I would offer assistance out of the goodness of my heart. Still, soon I shall be able to see to it that they *do* have that means. If it tempts or even confuses them, so much the better.

"At present, they still believe that my goal is to stop them from freeing Eliander. Whether we help them, asked or unasked, or whether we stand by and merely observe, we must do nothing to alter that belief. They must believe even as they rouse Eliander from his sleep, so that they may perform their task secure in the knowledge that they have thwarted my designs. They are not yet so strong that they cannot be dealt with after the fact, and unless they learn every last secret of working the magic that will free Eliander, I shall never be able to bridge the gap between this dimension and their own."

Lilith's eyes shone. "What power that will be! Do they realize yet what power it will take to free him? Even you, my pet—do even you realize what power they carry with them all unknowing? If I had confidence that their traversing their seven Portals had nothing to do with the sword's workings, I would take them from the world this instant and force the knowledge of the sword's use from their living minds. Then we would see who would rule in Hell."



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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Quotations: The quotes that introduce Chapters 1, 3-5, and 9 through the epilogue as well as the blessings spoken by Mosaia and Brother Paulus are drawn from the scriptures and traditions of Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, the Baha'i Faith, and the Pueblo and Cherokee tribes of North America. Where they have been adapted to fit Carotian cosmology and theology, the adaptation has been undertaken in a spirit of the utmost love and reverence.

Languages: The phonemes and vocabulary of both Old High Thalybdenocian and the ancient *Aranyakan* tongue that Alla employs for her chant in Chapter 12 were drawn (and somewhat freely adapted) from Farsi in the first case and a blend of a number of Native American and tribal African languages in the second.

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It is important to remember that, when we speak of there being three major races inhabiting Caros (or two inhabiting both Thalas and Ereb), we are discussing those sentient who are organized into ordered societies. All three worlds—even Thalas—are also peopled with various sentient creatures who live solitary lives or live in small tribes. Some, like the sprites and sylphs who visited Mistra, are spirit-folk. Some, like the average unicorn, are material beings. Still others, like Minissa's unicorns, live in both realms at once. —Peri

Most readers will not be reading this account in its original language. I've asked the translators to do their best to preserve the sense of idioms and units of measurement and so on, although I know that will leave some translations with some rough edges (people will, for instance, "inch" along in some Terran languages, although the basic unit of measurement is being expressed as the meter, when neither the inch nor the meter is actually used in the Union). It will also leave the questors occasionally using expressions it is unlikely they would have picked up on their own worlds. However, Mistra had at this point recently returned from a short sojourn on earth and had picked up a few local expressions that she actually used from time to time, and these I have recorded faithfully (though they will make little sense to those not raised in the Terran cultures). — Peri

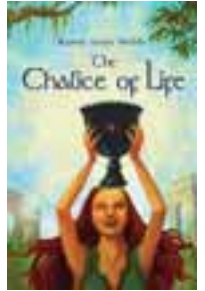
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KAREN ANNE WEÖÖ

Chapter 12

Mistra eventually translated the chant, but even with Alla's help, she always felt it lost something of that primal power in translation. The words ran, roughly, like this: "I pray you Great Goddess, by the wind and water, by the eagle that flies, by the tiger that prowls, by the horse that runs free upon the plain, and by the elk that fights for mastery of the herd; by the sun, moon, stars, and rainbow; let me draw the fluid from this woman's spine and use it to help the dragons." —Peri



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