

The Phoenix Transformed

The
New York Times
Bestseller

Book Three of
The
Enduring
Flame

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Authors

Mercedes Lackey
and James Mallory

**The
Phoenix
Transformed**

BY MERCEDES LACKEY AND JAMES MALLORY

THE ENDURING FLAME

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The Phoenix Transformed

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The
Phoenix
Transformed

Book Three of
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*This book is respectfully dedicated to
the men and women of the United States Military.
Godspeed and safe home.*

—James P. Mallory

**The
Phoenix
Transformed**

Prologue: Shadows and Fire

A LITTLE MORE THAN a year ago Tiercel Rolfort and Harrier Gillain had been ordinary boys looking toward an ordinary future. Harrier had been ready to embark upon the Apprenticeship that would eventually lead to him succeeding his father as Harbormaster of Armethalieh Port, and Tiercel, like most of his age-mates, would be attending Armethalieh University before taking his place in the thriving bureaucracy of the Nine Cities.

But that was Before.

Tiercel's innocent interest in ancient history had led him to a series of increasingly-terrifying discoveries. First, that he was able to wield the power of the High Magick, something that had been forgotten in the Nine Cities for nearly a thousand years. Second, that having done so led him to experience visions that he came to believe were a warning of a return of the Endarkened, the creatures defeated and banished by the Blessed Saint Idalia and Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy over a millennium before.

And third, that nobody believed him, even his best friend.

Desperate to find someone who would believe his warning—or at least to put an end to his visions, which Tiercel was convinced were meant for someone else—Tiercel went in search of a Wildmage. And even though Harrier found it hard to accept the reality of what Tiercel was telling him, he had no intention of allowing his best friend to go off on a quest like that all by himself.

Their search took them to the Elven Lands, where they were told that not only had the visions indeed been meant for Tiercel, but that the Elves believed that the Light had chosen Tiercel to destroy this new manifestation of the Dark, and felt that he must choose his own path to doing so—without their assistance.

But neither the Elves—nor the Light—meant to leave Tiercel entirely helpless. Not only was Jermayan able to transfer Ancaladar's Bond to Tiercel, giving him the power to cast the spells of the High Magick, but Harrier discovered, once they had left the Elven City, that he was to become the first Knight-Mage since Kellen Tavaddon himself.

Their search for the mysterious Lake of Fire that Tiercel had seen in his visions led them out of the Elven Lands to the deserts of the south. There, having sent Ancaladar into hiding in order to avoid panic, Tiercel searched the archives of Tarnatha'Iteru for clues to the Lake of Fire's location as Harrier began his training in warfare with Macendor Telchi, a Selken Warrior whom they had rescued on their journey.

Tiercel had nearly given up hope of finding the Lake of Fire when refugees from one of the other desert cities arrived, bringing word that an army of Isvaieni were sacking the cities of the border. Knowing that he and Harrier might be the only ones capable of defending Tarnatha'Iteru, they chose to stay.

When the Isvaieni army arrived, Tiercel attempted to reason with its commander, only to discover that Zanattar believed he was fighting a holy war to cleanse the desert of those who were tainted by belief in the False Balance. With no other way to protect the city, Tiercel cast MageShield around all of Tarnatha'Iteru, but he could only hold the impenetrable spell-wall in place for as long as he remained awake. Harrier and the people of the city hoped that by the time Tiercel's MageShield fell, it might be an equal fight. But when the shield fell at last, and Tarnatha'Iteru's army opened its gates, the Isvaieni army proved to be a strong and relentless enemy. It attacked and sacked the city. Tiercel and Harrier were taken alive, as Zanattar believed them to be Demons, whom only the Wildmage Bisochim could kill safely. As they were held, drugged and bound, in the Isvaieni camp, Tiercel managed to rouse himself enough to summon Ancaladar. Now, at last, with the trail left by the fleeing Isvaieni army to follow, Tiercel was certain they could reach the Lake of Fire.

But Ancaladar was unable to locate it from the sky, and the only possible conclusion for him to draw was that it was concealed by powerful magical wards. Since those wards wouldn't prevent Harrier and Tiercel from following the visible trail that hundreds of *shotors* had made in the desert *regh*, Ancaladar left the two of them in some ruins he'd spotted from the air, and flew off to steal them the equipment and mounts they'd require to make the journey.

The ruins were the ruins of Abi'Abadshar, the ancient Elven city to which Shaiara of the Nalzindar had led her people for sanctuary. Shaiara was able to tell them all she knew of Bisochim the Wildmage, while Tiercel told Shaiara all he knew and suspected of Bisochim's plans. Discovering from Shaiara's account of the Ingathering of the Tribes that Bisochim would have searched for the Nalzindar, and having had his own experience of the power of Bisochim's magic, Tiercel realized that Abi'Abadshar must have been protecting the Nalzindar from discovery with magic of its own, and he, Harrier, and Ancaladar searched the underground city for something that might serve as a weapon in the battle they must fight.

They found nothing at all, until they reached the tenth and lowest level of the city.

And there, Ancaladar vanished.

One



A Terrible Beauty

THE BINRAZAN WERE one of the largest and wealthiest tribes to make their home between Sand and Star. Fully ten double-hands of tents could Phulda their *Ummara* number when he counted that which the Binrazan held—and swift *shotors*, and flocks of fat sheep, and goats as well—for Binrazan wealth lay not in its hunting skills, as did the Khulbana's, nor yet in its ability to wrest gold and gems from the secret places of the desert, as did the Kadyastar's, nor in its trade in rare spices, like the Hinturi, nor in its harvest of salt, as the Kareggi did. The Binrazan were master rug makers and weavers, whose carpets graced the floor of every tent of every tribe, and the homes of the soft city-dwellers as well, who paid in cloth and glass and *kaffeyah* and glittering sugar from distant lands, in cakes of *xocalatl* and in medicines and in good steel knives and even in gold. Gold bought little among the Isvaieni, but it bought much in the *Iteru*-cities, and so the Binrazan accepted it in trade, for it could be held for a season or full turn of seasons and then exchanged for as much value as on the day it had been given.

For these reasons, and for the need of their flocks, the Binrazan had always kept to the edge of the Isvai, traveling between the Border Cities known even in the Cold North as the String of Pearls for their fabled wealth.

The first time Narbuc of the Binrazan had gone to Elparus' *Iteru* to say that the Binrazan had come to Rulbasi Well, he had seen eight Gatherings and had just begun his apprenticeship to Curam, master rug maker of the tribe. Then, he had not believed that any people could live as he saw these living, and his elder cousin had laughed, and had told him there were many strange sights to be seen between Sand and Star. Years passed. Master-weaver Curam went to lay his bones upon the sand, and Lacin became the new master, and still Narbuc practiced and learned. His life—as his father's and his father's before him—seemed as unchanging as the Isvai itself.

Then, in the depths of one summer's heat, all changed. At first it was no more than unrest and rumor, and then it became something that Phulda must go and see for himself, and so the Binrazan came to Sapthiruk Oasis when the next Gathering of the Tribes was more than six moonturns away, and there Phulda heard the words of the Wildmage Bisochim, who told them all of the terrible danger they faced.

And when Phulda returned to the tents of the Binrazan to speak of the warning that the Wildmage Bisochim had come to give, Narbuc discovered he had walked all unawares of peril all his days, as the foraging *sheshu* browses unawares of the towering falcon, for Bisochim had come to warn all the Isvaieni that the people of the cities had long ago given up their hearts to false truths, and, as a fool will envy a man who possesses riches that the fool cannot use, the city-dwellers now hated the Isvaieni for having kept faith with the Balance and meant to enslave them.

And so all the tribes—thousands of men and women, and all that belonged to them, down to the last herd-dog and hunting-hound and fat sheep and weanling kid—followed Bisochim into the depths of the Barahileth, upon a journey that was hard, but not as hard as the yoke of enslavement that their enemies prepared for them.

From Sapthiruk to the place called Telinchechitl, that journey was the work of three moonturns to accomplish, and without Bisochim to guide and sustain them, many would have died. But at last he brought them to the place where—so Phulda had told the Binrazan—they would wait and prepare for the day they might fall upon those who held to the False Balance. And if Sapthiruk had been a garden of impossible splendor, Narbuc did not know how he should name the Plains of Telinchechitl, with its tall date palms, its orchards of figs and *naranjes* and *limuns*, its fields of green barley and sweet green grass and devices which cast water upon the very wind to slake its fierce heat, just as if water were something as infinite as the sands of the desert itself.

Yet here, in this place where there was nothing but soft cool breezes and sweet grass and sweet fruits and endless water, there came anger and bloodshed between tribe and tribe before two moonturns had passed. It seemed, despite Bisochim's wise words, that there would be no end to the strife, for how could any man avoid a quarrel if there was nowhere he might go that he could not look upon the face of his enemy? And it was true that Telinchechitl was the strangest and most beautiful place any of the Isvaieni had ever seen, but beyond its boundaries there was nothing but the stark waterless desolation of the Barahileth. Paradise penned them in as closely as the walls of the *Iteru*-cities closed up their inhabitants, and such confinement chafed.

And so it was that when Bisochim spoke to them of a thing they all knew well—that of all the tribes numbered among the Isvaieni, one was absent from the Great Ingathering—all the young hunters were eager to turn their skills to seeking out the Nalzindar wherever they might be.

All, perhaps, save Narbuc.

He was not alone among his age-mates in staying behind when the men and women of the Isvaieni rode forth, but nearly all of the others were women with infants too young to leave. Of all the rest—youths who had barely seen a dozen Gatherings, grizzled elders of two-score years who might have chosen to remain within their tents—all rode forth. They went in bands of fifteen or twenty—no more—nor did it matter that this one might be Adanate and that one might be Fadaryama, for before they had gone, each who rode had sworn a blood-oath of fellowship to hold all the others as dear as the kin of their own tents.

Had he been needed to defend the people, Narbuc would have gone with the others without question. But Narbuc had no proficiency with *geschak* or *awardan*—or even spear or bow. All his life, Narbuc had honed his skills in the direction that would most benefit his tribe—to gain skill with the loom so that perhaps one day he might win Master-weaver Lacin's place as Master-weaver for the Binrazan. And one more pair of eyes would make far less difference upon the sands of the Isvai than one more pair of hands in Lacin's weaving tent. With the other young men of the Binrazan tents gone, only Narbuc and the elders remained to work the looms and knot the rugs. And there were many rugs that must be made.

It was nearly half a year before those who had gone forth from Telinchechitl returned . . . those who did. Eight thousand had ventured forth. Half that number came back.

To discover that the true wealth of the Isvaieni had been wiped from the face of the future, as the Sandwind scoured the tracks of the hunter from the desert itself, was catastrophe enough. To hear the news that the young hunters returned with made that disaster as small and meaningless as a pot of spoiled dye when one's tent was ablaze. Those who had ridden forth now called themselves warriors—not mere hunters—and claimed they had struck the first blow against the False Balance. They spoke of Demons with the faces of children, of discovering proof that the False Balance had slain the Blue Robes upon whom the Isvaieni depended for protection, of riding in vengeance to pull down the walls of the String of Pearls and burn the *Iteru*-cities to the ground.

It was this last boast which caused words to sit beneath Narbuc's tongue like a burning coal, for many of those who had ridden with Zanattar—who named himself

chief-of-warriors without being master of any tent—had never walked the streets of an *Iteru*-city before the day upon which they had entered it to bring fire and death. And the proudest boast of all the new warriors was that they had left none alive behind them—but could all, *all*, down to the unweaned child rocked in its mother's arms, be guilty of fealty to the False Balance?

It was a question for which Narbuc had no answer, and as day followed day another question took its place beside the first: how could Bisochim, the most powerful Wildmage ever seen between Sand and Star, able to call upon the power of a dragon as other men whistled hawks to their hand and *ikulas*-hounds to heel, have let such events come to pass? If this was truly the will of the Wild Magic, there must be some deep truth that Bisochim might reveal to ease Narbuc's mind.

It was with this hope in his heart that Narbuc set out toward Bisochim's fortress at the top of the cliffs of Telinchechitl. Narbuc had never been inside Bisochim's great fortress. He did not know anyone who had. He did not know why it should be that a Wildmage—servant of the Wild Magic, an individual who belonged to all tribes and none of them, one of those who by custom called no tent their own—should possess a vast stone house larger than the largest house of the greatest city-dweller. Narbuc did not like to presume to enter such a place. But Bisochim had not been seen upon the Plains of Telinchechitl for many days, and if Narbuc wished to have words of him, Narbuc must ascend to Bisochim's dwelling.

The tents of the Isvaieni were as far from the cliff upon which Bisochim's dwelling perched as a man might walk in the time it took for the sun to turn from gleam of light upon the horizon to a full disk, and Narbuc was grateful for the grass beneath his feet and the decadent waste of water that vanished so quickly into the air, for his journey was made beneath the brutal heat of the noonday sun. He had waited to slip away upon his errand until the people rested quietly in their tents. Only madmen and fools ventured forth at the peak of the desert day. Madmen—or those who were desperate.

In his desire to speak privately with Bisochim, Narbuc's many visits to the *Iteru*-cities served him well. Had he been born to the tents of the Tunag or the Zarungad, he would not have recognized that which led to Bisochim's fortress, or their purpose. But in the *Iteru*-cities he had seen stairs many times, and sometimes even walked up and down them, though in all his visits to the *Iteru*-cities, never had Narbuc seen stairs that climbed so high. After the first few minutes, his legs began to ache at the unfamiliar exercise, and there was still a very great distance to traverse.

His discomfort was only increased by the intense and unfamiliar heat. The Isvaieni were a desert people, used to the desert's merciless heat, but here there was nothing but stone and sun. The air around him shimmered with heat, and the stone beneath his feet was hot enough for him to feel through the soles of his desert boots. The sun of the Barahileth beat down upon his *chadar* as if he wore nothing upon his head at all.

And still he climbed.

At last Narbuc began to feel faint bursts of coolness upon his face—a sensation he was now familiar with—and knew them for welcome droplets of cool water, borne on the wind from fountains in the fortress above. His dry mouth ached with the desire to quench his thirst at such a fountain, and not so many more stairs would bring him to his goal.

But when he reached the top of the pale sandstone stairs, instead of turning left to refresh himself at the fountain he could see beyond the low wall, Narbuc found his steps turning right, and leading him forward across the wide flat area at the top of the stair, toward a second staircase cut into the wall of the black cliff itself. His mind screamed with terror, but he could not give voice to his fear, any more than he could command his body to turn back. He was as helpless as the *sheshu* in the *fenec*'s jaws, and his limbs did not obey his will. Within his thoughts Narbuc wept and begged for whatever power that had taken possession of him to release him, but all he could do was climb higher along the face of the cliff. The heat he had felt before was nothing to this. That had been the heat of the sun. This was the heat of fire.

When Narbuc had unwillingly reached the top of the second stair, he understood. This was no solid cliff as he had thought, but an open bowl filled with molten rock. Never had he thought to see such, nor did he wish to see it now, for the wind of it blew toward his face, causing his skin to tighten and ache with heat. Far below—perhaps nearly level with the desert floor—rock glowed orange and yellow with heat, and flames of fire danced over it as if it were burning charcoal. To touch it would be a death more horrible than death by burning.

But even as his mind framed that thought, Narbuc found his hands clutching at the rock which lay before him, and found himself clambering up and over. To touch the rock was as if he laid his hands upon a cooking stone prepared for flat cakes, yet he could neither cry out nor draw back. The terror that he felt at having his body move without—*against*—his will nearly overwhelmed the pain of his injuries. First one leg swung itself over the lip of the caldera, then the other, and for one hideous moment Narbuc thought his traitorous body meant to leap into the lake of fire. But then it turned itself and began to lower itself carefully down the sloping inner wall.

It was such a cliff as a man might indeed climb, were he careful and lucky. Narbuc had done such things himself many wheels of the seasons before, near the southernmost of the String of Pearls, Orinaisal'Iteru, where the desert was edged by tall cliffs. But those cliffs were smooth stone warmed only by the sun, not a crumbling slope of sparkling jagged shards that tore at his robes and at his seared and burning flesh. Narbuc's hands were work-hardened, calloused from years working with loom and awl, yet they were cut and torn now by his descent as if they had been the soft hands of a child. He was bleeding from a hundred cuts when his hands and feet finally lost their purchase upon the wall and he tumbled the rest of the way to the bottom.

Had he possessed voice, Narbuc would have screamed then, for the stone he fell upon was as hot as fire, searing him even through his robes, and the stone beneath him was . . . yielding. Though his volition had been plucked from him as easily as he might take a toy from a child, he retained all his ability to feel. Every breath he took seared his lungs with its heat and caused him to choke and gag, for the air was foul with the scent of strange burning. Then, as suddenly as the terrible compulsion had come upon him, it was lifted. His shriek of anguish burst from his throat even as Narbuc lunged to his feet to batter at his smoldering clothing with burned and bleeding hands. He scrambled backward to the narrow ledge at the very bottom of the cliff, where the stone was burning hot but at least it was solid.

That was when he saw *Her*. A woman stood upon the surface of the boiling rock. She wore no clothing, and her skin was as pale as if it had never been touched by the sun. It shone with the reflections—orange and gold and white—of the fires she walked through untouched. Her hair was long enough that it might have fallen to her knees, unbound and uncovered as a young girl might go in her mother's tent. It was of a color Narbuc had never seen, and in its golds and pale reds it made him think of metal and fire, though it lofted on the wind like a veil of softest finest linen upon the desert breeze.

And though the rock beneath his feet seared him, though the agony of standing so close to the scorching cliff wall was only exceeded by the agony of moving away from it, still Narbuc must stop and *see*.

The woman held her arms out to him, beckoning: *Come*.

And Narbuc would not. For nearly a moonturn his ears had been fed upon tales of Demons who sought the lives of the Isvaieni, and he was no boy, too young to have heard every tale from *The Book of the Light* told over by the storysinger of the tribe. Narbuc was a man grown, and more than grown, and had heard every word of *The Book of the Light* spoken out not once, but three times: the great tales and the small ones. And he knew well what creature it was that could steal a man's will with a spell, that could take the shape of a woman yet stand upon the surface of burning stone as though she tarried in a garden of fountains and flowers.

And despite the knowing that he looked upon that which his grandsires uncounted generations removed had fought to send from the world forever, Narbuc still felt within himself the yearning to do that which the Demon desired: to walk out into that lake of death to gain the touch of her hand. He pressed himself against the wall behind him until the pain of burning threatened to overwhelm his senses, but at least that pain was enough to scour the other compulsion from his heart.

Seeing that he would not come to her, the Demon-woman lowered her arms and began to walk slowly toward him. Small puffs of flame flashed up from the burning stone each time she set her foot upon it, and as she walked, she smiled upon Narbuc—fondly, as a mother might smile upon an errant child.

His tears dried in his eyes just as the sweat had dried upon his skin, leaving behind only a stinging pain. Narbuc could not flee: the walls of the caldera were too steep to climb quickly—if they could be climbed at all—and the heat and the foul air leached more strength from him with each heartbeat. In a hundred heartbeats—no more—she would be able to reach out and lay her fingers upon his skin, and Narbuc knew not what would happen then. There was only one thing he might do to save himself.

With shaking fingers from which thick drying blood oozed, Narbuc scrabbled at his waist-sash. There, tied and knotted and folded into its wrappings, was his *geschak* in its sheath of leather and bone. Its brass-and-bone hilt seared his hand as he drew it, as if he clutched a bar of forging iron, but Narbuc did not care.

She was barely a dozen paces away when he pressed the sharpness of the blade against his neck and jerked the knife sharply across his own throat.



IN the years that had passed since he first came here to the Lake of Fire, Bisochim had cast many spells. Spells to bring an inexhaustible supply of sweet water up from the deep rock, spells to transform the ungiving clay of Telinchechitl into fertile earth upon which he could set thousands of hectares of garden and orchard, spells to gather grains of sand from the wind and transform it to stone, and turn that stone into the vast fortress of his home. Within his fortress there were workrooms for his study and chambers for his meditation, places in which he had formed his stone servants and then enchanted them into life. To live the life of perfect ease his hours of arduous study demanded required spell upon spell to wrest paradise from the hostile furnace of the Barahileth. Many of those spells Bisochim had cast wherever he had happened to be standing, for—possessed of Saravasse's inexhaustible store of magic to draw upon—Bisochim's spellcraft was limited only by the focus of his will.

Yet even with all the power of a dragon at his command, there were some operations so delicate that even in the midst of such isolation, they required a place of extraordinary seclusion and quiet. For such workings as these, Bisochim retreated to the black glass chamber.

Even Bisochim did not know how deep beneath the desert sands it lay. It was not a place he had crafted, but a place he had found—a perfect dome of black glass trapped within long-cooled rock. It had, he thought, been ancient when all the Barahileth was as molten as the Lake of Fire was now. He had made only three changes to fit it for his work. He had opened the passage that led, by a long narrow stair, to the lowest chamber of his fortress. He had smoothed the floor of the chamber into evenness. And he had called up a spring of water from the deep earth. The water of the spring was still and black and colder than the wind of the high skies at desert midnight, and it served no purpose but his magic. When he came here, the chamber was lit by a ball of Coldfire, its burning blue radiance making the deep cracks within the glass walls glint and shine. It was as cold as the sands above were hot. Its temperature never changed.

It was in this place that Bisochim listened for the voices in the fire, those faint whispering intimations of *intelligence* that had goaded him and guided him for so many long years. It was here that Bisochim sought, in dream-visions and scrying-spells, a way to avert the future he saw so clearly, the future that ended in death for the Isvaieni upon the blades of an invading army. It was his desire to protect his people that had led him to go among them to propose the Great Ingathering, but knowing that his brethren were a people both strong and proud, Bisochim had known that speaking to them of safety and retreat would not gain him their cooperation. Thus it was that he had spun them his tale of an invasion of the Isvai that was scant moonturns away, and of his desire, not to protect them, but to forge them into an army to destroy those who believed the lies told for so many years, that the Balance of all things was the Balance in truth, and need not be corrected.

In his heart Bisochim had always hoped it would not come to war. If he could only complete the work of his life, and set the Balance to rights, no one could undo what he had done. But he had found that a people who had roamed the trackless desert sands in utter freedom could not be peacefully gathered into one place to loiter in idleness, and so Bisochim set the young hunters of all the tribes to search for the Nalzindar, the only tribe which had not joined in the Great Ingathering. He had hoped by this means to accustom them by degrees to a quiet life living close beside one another. It would not have to endure for long. His work was nearly done.

But when the young hunters whom he had sent forth returned half a year later, having left thousands of their number dead behind them upon the sand, Bisochim knew two things, and the knowledge bound his heart like iron bands. The first thing he knew was that he had woven his tale too well: he had made Zanattar and the other young hunters greedy for war. They had seized upon a chance pretext to craft themselves into an army which fell upon the *Iteru*-cities like a starving pack of *fenerec* upon a fat flock of sheep.

And the second thing Bisochim knew was that what he had thought and hoped was merely a tale to serve his ends was not. He had long known that the Light would seek to stop him from turning the Balance from False to True, for he meant to return Darkness to the world. What was Light without Darkness, or a Balance without that which it balanced? It was nothing more than an empty mockery of that which it once had been. Yet any creature—any *force*—would seek to defend itself when it was threatened, and so Bisochim had known that the closer he came to the day of his victory, the closer would come the day that the Light would set huntsmen upon his tracks.

But six sennights ago the first of his Isvaieni returned, and the tales that came with them were terrible enough. Nine cities did Zanattar and his army shatter with their might as a thrown stone might shatter a clay pot. Upon the tenth they were nearly broken themselves before they rose up to seize their bloody victory. Those who returned to Telinchechitl spoke of a city defended by magic and of a child who fought as a Demon in a fashion no man had ever seen before a hail of slingstones brought him down. A moonturn later Zanattar returned, to tell of the spoils of war snatched from their grasp, and the rear guard of the army routed, when a dragon came to the rescue of his Mage.

Where there was one Dragonbond Mage, there would be more. Bisochim's power was great, but it could not stand against the power of all the Armies of the Light. Bisochim knew his only hope now to complete his work was to do so before those armies discovered Telinchechitl. For many years he had known what that work must be. To call Darkness back into the world into a form of flesh that he would craft to house it—and then to trap that fleshy form in spells of stasis and stone. Thus Darkness would be returned to the world—but safely. Powerless.

There might be a moonturn at best to accomplish a work for which he had hoped to have another full wheel of the seasons.

The spells that he must cast if his plan were to succeed were complex and delicate. First the flesh-form must be created—a body identical in every way to one birthed by any woman and raised to adulthood through many wheels of seasons. Next he must summon the Elemental Spirit of Darkness to inhabit it and bind the spirit to its fleshy form. Either spell alone would be the masterwork of an Elven Mage, the capstone of a lifetime of study. Bisochim must not only prepare and cast both, but he must cast them as closely together as two heartbeats, for he could only leave the flesh-form untenanted for the space of half a hundred heartbeats before it would be unfit for habitation. And having cast those two spells, he must cast a third, and a fourth, or else he would have done nothing more than released Darkness into the world again, unchained.

“Are you prepared to do all I shall command of you?” he asked his companion.

Until he had brought the Isvaieni across the Barahileth's desolation, no mortal eyes but Bisochim's had gazed upon Telinchechitl in uncounted millennia. And it was no man who stood beside him now. Though the creature bore mortal seeming, its form was as changeable as fire, for the Cliffs of Telinchechitl sheltered one of the ancient Places of Power, one of the last that had not been lost or Tainted through the centuries. Once it had been one of the Nine Shrines sacred to the Firesprites, and because of that, Bisochim had conjured up the Firecrown from the ancient echo of the Great Power which had held the Firesprites in its keeping. Though this creature was merely a shadow of the true Firecrown, even the shadow of a god could wield power sufficient to destroy nearly every enemy who walked beneath the sun. That it had failed to destroy his enemies when Bisochim had set it against them was explained now, for the power of a Dragonbond Mage would allow him to avoid the battle he

might well lose.

“You summoned me up from the darkness and sent me forth into the world. Now you have summoned me home as attendant and witness to that which is your great purpose. Be certain that I stand ready to do all that is needed,” the Firecrown replied.

“Then that is sufficient,” Bisochim said, nodding.

The creature he meant to summon was no Dragonbond Mage, and he was confident of the Firecrown’s ability to withstand it, should there be need. But in the first moments after its enchantment into its prison of flesh, it should be pliable, amenable to his commands. It would grant him the boon for which he had toiled. And should it prove recalcitrant, the Firecrown’s power would bring it quickly to heel. But Bisochim was certain there would be no difficulty. The voices in the fire to which he had listened for so long had promised him both that this was the way to restore the true rightness of the Balance, and to gain life for Saravasse, for a dragon’s years were bound to those of its Mage, and it was cruelly unfair that his dearest beloved should end her life in a brief span of decades merely because Isvaieni years were brief. The Darkness he would summon and bind would grant him immortality to match its own, and then he would chain it forever.

He began, as he had for so many years, by attuning himself to the voices in the fire. Once Bisochim had needed to strain to hear them, wondering all the while if his mind deceived him. Later he had needed to guard himself against their subtle trickery. At last he had won mastery over them, and they had become his guides.

He was not certain whether it was his own fear that the time he had to complete his work had grown impossibly short, or that the voices wished to communicate some warning of their own, but today he sensed an urgency in them which had never been present before. The chorus of ethereal voices filled his mind until he could no longer hear his own breath, his own heartbeat, saying in a thousand different ways: *hurry, hurry, hurry* . . .

The danger was great. If he called the Spirit of Darkness to a form into which he could not bind it—one that was too weak to hold it, or that had ceased to live before the spirit came to tenant it—he would merely have loosed the creature upon the world in its Elemental form, and he would be unable to Bind it. It would go free to wander the land like some terrible plague, unable to truly claim a body for its own, but destroying hundreds—thousands—in its attempts to try. Yet if his work remained undone when his enemies reached Telinchechitl, the long labor of years would all be for nothing, and centuries of destruction and error might pass before another was called, as he had been, to this holy purpose.

Bisochim did not let himself think of that possibility further. To imagine a thing was to call it into being: this was a lesson he had learned long before the Three Books had come into his hands.

One more test.

He spread his hands wide, palms down, above the black glass floor. He concentrated, summoning the intricate pattern of the spell within his mind, drawing upon Saravasse’s power as he did so. Any Wildmage could Call Fire out of nothingness, Coldfire out of darkness, water from the desert sands, winds from the sky. With the power of a dragon to call upon, Bisochim could do far more. A pale fog began to shimmer over the black stone, as if he merely summoned a ball of Coldfire. But it did not begin to glow, or to rise from the stone. Instead it became thicker and more opaque, and as it did, it coalesced from an amorphous blob of mist into something vaguely man-shaped.

Perhaps a hundred heartbeats passed as Bisochim poured power into his spell of Making, his brow furrowed with fierce concentration. The mist darkened, took on the warm hues of living flesh. At last the spell was complete. Lying upon the stone, looking as if she merely slept, was a woman who might have drunk *kaffeyah* unnoticed in any of the tents on the plains above. Her skin was the pale amber of wild honey, and her hair was as black and shining as the stone upon which she lay. She was perfect in every detail. All she lacked was the spark of life . . .

As he stood regarding his creation, the moments ticked past. *Too late, too late, too late*, whispered the voices in his mind. Begin the Spell of Calling now, and by the time it was cast, the conjured body would not hold the spirit. But all was well. This had only been a test. The last one. With a wave of his hand he unmade the unmoving and imperceptibly-rotting form at his feet, unbinding it into the essential elements of its creation. A puff of air, a flare of heat, and a pool of water that lay glistening upon the rock—to unmake a thing was far easier than to make it.

He drew a deep breath, suddenly as nervous as a boy about to embark upon his first hunt. No more practice. No more tests. The chain of spells must be cast now. When his work was complete, the Isvaieni could scatter. Bisochim would go in search of his enemy to announce his victory. Then—when they understood that further battle was useless—his task would at last be complete.

Once more he stretched out his hands above the stone. Once more the beautiful lifeless form of an Isvaieni woman appeared out of mist. And then, in the very instant its flesh coalesced, he began the spell he had never been able to practice in its entirety—the delicate dangerous conjuration that would embody the Darkness Itself in a living—all-but-mortal—form. The voices in the fire wailed in his ears as never before, as if they wished to give voice to the triumph he should feel at his long-deferred success. Bisochim did not acknowledge them, for he could not spare anything from his concentration upon the spell. Celebration would come later.

As much as he wished to hurry, he dared not. Each unvoiced word, each mental image, each imagined gesture, must be absolutely precise, or the spell itself would fail—or complete itself in some unimaginably disastrous fashion. He dared not even take a portion of his attention away from his conjuration to consider how much time had passed since he had begun, or to pray that his original calculations had been correct. All he could do was continue.

Bisochim had spent years of his life journeying as a spirit through the realms of What Once Was, seeking the answers to his questions. The mortal senses of men were not equipped to sense all he found there, and so it was as if one thing became another, until it had become something he might understand. So it was now, as Bisochim sensed the Planes of Manifestation turn upon one another like the rings of a puzzle-box, until a gap between one and the next was formed through the power of his Calling . . .

. . . and the Elemental Spirit of Darkness slipped free.

But to free it was not enough: he must bind it, not once, but three times: once into flesh, next into an eternal spell of unchanging sleep, last of all into a prison forged from the living rock, so that it could neither escape its prison of flesh, nor be freed by any other. He had kept the knowledge of the spells of stone and sleep from the voices in the fire, and they had sworn to him that he would have their assistance for the spell of flesh. And so it was, for not even a heartbeat passed between the moment when the Spirit of Darkness crossed the last of the Planes of Manifestation across which Bisochim had summoned it and the moment that the woman on the stones drew her first breath. It was the work of an instant to cast the single spell of all the spells he must cast this day that he had been able to prepare in advance, and Bind Elemental Spirit fast to now-living flesh.

She rose gracefully to her feet and shook out her long flowing hair.

“I have given you form, as I promised your masters I would do, and it is for you to grant the payment that I will name for the service I have rendered,” Bisochim said harshly. Immortality would be his: the voices in the fire had told him that gift would be within the spirit’s power to grant. His immortality would gain immortality for Saravasse as well.

The woman laughed.

Her laughter, wild and cold, rang from the walls of the black glass chamber, and when she met his eyes, Bisochim saw with a thrill of disquiet that they were not black, as he had expected them to be, but bright hawk-gold. Her lips curved in a mocking smile.

“It is I who will choose the coin of your payment, Wildmage, not you. Foolish creature of clay—did you truly think that you could presume to call Ahairan to you as if

she were your hound and then chain her up once she had done your bidding? You are fortunate that I do not strike the life from your body in this instant.”

The fire-voices sang a mocking song of triumph, and Bisochim suddenly knew that he had been betrayed.

The voices in the fire had meant him for their tool, to free the Darkness, not chain it. Yet he had been Isvaieni before he became Wildmage, and Wildmage long before he became the voices’ pawn. The spells of *Sleep* and *Stone* were knowledge he had kept from them. He raised his hand to send the creature that had named itself Ahairan into the spell-fed sleep from which there would be no awakening.

But before he could cast his spell, he fell to his knees. Every nerve and sinew in his body had kindled into fire, and it was all that he could do to keep from crying out in agony. “Aid . . . me . . .” he gasped, looking toward the Firecrown.

“Oh, Wildmage, you are a fool.” Ahairan knelt before him, gazing into his eyes, and try as he might, Bisochim could neither look away nor raise his hand against her. “I was born in fire, and fire knows its own. The names of those who once called upon the Firecrown are no longer known. Their songs and dances are not remembered. The Children of Water have taken all of their places, and you have made of Holy Fire a thing you kill a thousand times a day with air and with water. The Dark killed all the Children of Stars even as they begged for the aid of their god—the Firecrown did nothing to save its own children, yet you, *you*, are the people Great Firecrown will aid?” She laughed softly. Her breath was as hot as the desert wind and smelled of burning stone, and her hair was no longer true black—if it ever had been—but shone with highlights of deep gold and red. “No, Wildmage. Do not look to the Firecrown for help.”

She rose to her feet and stepped away and—just as suddenly as it had come—the pain was gone.

“I was willing to allow you to spread Darkness across the land at my side. Not only immortality, Wildmage—for both you and your pet—but power such as even the Kings of Men have never dreamed of. You should have worshiped me for my beauty. Instead, you chose to demand payment—I should strike you dead for such insolence! But I shall give you one more chance to freely yield yourself to me. Beneath my hand, you shall gain such knowledge as you have not yet imagined.”

When she had released Bisochim from the fire in his bones, weakness had taken its place, but now horror at her words lent him strength. If he had summoned Darkness back into the world, he could at least deny it a body with which to breed up a new race of monsters. Once more he summoned up the Spell of Unmaking, and swept it toward Ahairan’s golden body.

It had no effect.

Ahairan laughed as she ran soft hands over her breasts and down her thighs. “Wildmage, truly you are twice a fool! No spell a Wildmage may cast can slay me now that I have been given form.”

“Destroy her!” Bisochim said to the Firecrown. “I command it!”

“How shall you command without understanding?” the Firecrown answered. “And yet I say this to you: that which you first asked of me is not yet complete.”

Once more Ahairan’s mocking laughter rang out, and then she was gone, running lightly from the chamber toward the narrow doorway—darkness opening into darkness—that led to the narrow spiraling flight of stairs. She was chained in flesh, trapped in a single form, but that was the only curb upon her power—and with time she might find some way to defeat that limitation as well.

Staggering with weakness, Bisochim forced himself to his feet. He leaned heavily against the wall of the chamber, shuddering at the unnatural chill of the stone. The enormity of what he had done was like a terrible wound—one he dared not yet acknowledge. For more than half his life he had been working toward this moment. He had meant to set the Balance right by returning Darkness to the world. Now that he had succeeded, he knew he had committed a crime more terrible than he could begin to imagine. He had not set the Balance right. He had destroyed it.

But if he could not unmake Ahairan, he could at least destroy his unruly servant. To unbind an Elemental Force would be more difficult than to unbind a mere form of flesh, but he would find the strength. He looked toward the Firecrown and raised one trembling hand.

“You must look to your people,” the Firecrown said.

And then, without moving a step, the creature simply vanished.



THE ascent was a long one, and by the time Bisochim had ascended the stairs to the surface, weariness had layered itself upon exhaustion and shock until only desperation drove him onward. He had been betrayed on every side—by those he had been arrogant enough to think he had tamed into becoming his allies, by the servant he had crafted from the magic of the Lake of Fire itself. He knew not what he could do to atone for his terrible offense—against the Wild Magic, against the Light, against all the Peoples of the Light. Death would be too quick and too kind, and he would take with him the one stainless innocent creature whose life he had begun this madness hoping to save.

Saravasse.

She had begged him a thousand times to turn away from this quest for knowledge, and he had refused. She had grown cold and silent and distant, and Bisochim had told himself that when he had secured immortality for her he would have centuries to win back her love. Instead, he had secured nothing but her hatred, and the hatred of every living creature, all through his arrogance and pride. Bisochim, greatest of the Blue Robes! He had drunk so deeply of their praise in the years of his youth that he had poisoned himself with it.

He hardly knew where he walked—only that he climbed up, and up, and up—until he found himself stepping out into the sunlight. He was standing upon one of the terraces of his palace—his spirit cringed, hearing his own thoughts, for what use did an Isvaieni have for a great stone palace?—overlooking the vast gardens he had created on the plains of Telinchechitl. Once, he had turned the waste of salt and *ishmain* into a garden simply because he could. Later, he’d had cause to be grateful that the thousands of hectares of orchards and grasslands were there as a refuge for his Isvaieni.

He groaned aloud. They were not *his*. They were their own. He had been poisoned by the words of Demons and fed the desertfolk upon the bread of lies. He had made each one of them a murderer a hundred times over, and bathed them in innocent blood. How could he go before the *Ummarai*, the *chaharums*, and say to them that he had lied? That he had cloaked his arrogance in words of concern for their safety, used the Wild Magic to steal their judgment, made their children into bandits and killers, and destroyed their future?

His mind was still filled with the magnitude of his betrayal when he reached the edge of the terrace. He gazed out over the Plains of Telinchechitl, his thoughts still hazy with the enormity of the treason for which he had been the instrument. He could not imagine what he must do next. But what Bisochim saw when he looked down stopped the breath in his throat.

It was nearly midday, and all the Isvaieni should be within their tents, resting through the time of greatest heat. But from his vantage point, he could see movement beneath the trees. The people were coming forth from every tent. Elders carried small children. Mothers carried babies. All moved toward the cliffs with silent and deliberate purpose. For several moments, Bisochim could only watch in disbelief. At first, the only thought within Bisochim’s mind was that they must be coming to exact justice for what he had done. He did not know how they could know of it, but the weight of his guilt was a crushing thing, too overwhelming to permit clear thought.

Then he saw *Her*.

She was at the very base of the cliff, seated upon a *shotor* such as had never been foaled, for its coat was as black as a *jarrari*'s carapace. Its saddle and lead-rope were not such as any of the Isvaieni would ever use, for the saddle gleamed with beaten gold, and the lead rope was of silk as red as blood. It was the same color as the billowing desert robes she wore—thin scarlet silk that the hot winds molded against the sinuous curves of her slim body. She looked up toward him, and he saw her white teeth flash in a smile of mocking triumph. “*Oh, Wildmage, you are a fool.*” It almost seemed to Bisochim that he could hear her voice whispering within his mind, just as the voices in the fire had whispered for so very long, and in that moment he truly began to understand the full horror of what he had done.

He had brought Darkness back into the world, and clothed it in flesh.

In The Time of Legend, a race called the Endarkened had wielded the powers of Darkness, and the Peoples of the Light had named them “Demons.” They had been what Ahairan’s descendents might yet become: Elemental Darkness fused perfectly to living flesh, not merely bound within it, as she was. In their time, the Endarkened had taken their sorcerous power from blood and pain and death: in his journeys upon the spirit-roads of What Once Was, Bisochim had seen horrors enough that he had taken great care to render the Spirit of Elemental Darkness that he would summon into the world weak and helpless.

He had failed.

And now Ahairan meant to feed, just as the Endarkened once had fed. The Isvaieni were not coming to seek him out. They were coming—at Ahairan’s summoning—to ascend the steps that led to the Lake of Fire and *cast themselves into it*.

He must stop them.

Since he had first chosen to set aside the Blue Robes of the Wildmage and live a life of solitude and secrets, Bisochim had known the spells that could overshadow the minds of men and women. Until he had compelled the *Ummarai* to lead the tribes to Telinchechitl, the only purpose he had used them for was to allow himself to pass unquestioned in a land where the presence of any stranger aroused suspicion. And because *The Book of Stars* said “*that which harms can also heal,*” those same spells could restore free will to one from whom it had been stolen. He gathered his strength, he drew upon Saravasse’s power, and he cast the spell that would free the Isvaieni from their malign enchantment.

Nothing happened.

They did not falter by so much as one footstep in their inexorable progress toward the staircase.

Again Bisochim cast the same spell—to no effect—and then he tried every other spell he could think of that might serve. Spells that would drive illusion from the mind. Spells that would drive fear from the heart. Spells to permit clear-seeing. Spells to steal the strength from the limbs, so that the vast column of advancing Isvaieni would fall down where they stood. Spells to cast them into sleep. Spells to steal their will a second time and force them to his will as Ahairan had forced them to hers. He drove himself to the edge of exhaustion.

And nothing worked.

Soon the first of them would reach the stair and begin to climb, and behind that one, five and ten and twenty and fifty—*thousands* to climb the hundreds of steps that led to the lip of the caldera, and there, to cast themselves down into the lake of molten rock within. There was only one thing left for him to do.

Grain by grain, sand had become stone had become steps and floors and walls. Magic did not bind it, any more than magic bound any dwelling-place of quarried stone. But magic could unbind it. He reached out with his mind and Set the Spell of Unmaking as he had once set a dozen spells to make and shape and bind. The wall beneath his fingertips softened, shifted, began to dissolve. He stepped back from the edge of the terrace as it crumbled into sand and blew away.

Behind him, around him, all that was stone returned to sand—slowly at first, then faster as the working of the spell gained momentum. The lower half of the staircase cascaded downward with a soft hiss, what had been steps and balustrades pouring outward onto the grass below like spilled grain. The water of a hundred fountains sprayed wildly into the air as their fountains and conduits and channels dissolved around them. The palace that had held a thousand rooms hissed and slid away down the side of the cliff, carrying upon its wave of sand chests, carpets, draperies—everything it held that was not made of stone. In moments, the fortress that had been poised near the top of the black cliff was no more than an inexorable spill of sand sliding down its face.

Yet Bisochim survived. He had been born to the tents of the Adanate Isvaieni, a tribe of the deep desert, and the Adanate well understood the natural hazards in making their way across the soft and shifting face of the great dune sea, where an unwary misstep might bury a man—or a string of *shotors*—beneath the sand in instants. It had been many years since Bisochim had needed the skills to keep his footing atop an uncertain surface of constantly moving sand, but his body had not forgotten them. Almost without thought, he rode the flowing cascade of sand earthward, walking back up against the rushing tide of sand to keep himself from being buried beneath it. And when the rush of sand slowed, Bisochim stood upon the apex of the great dune and gazed about himself.

The air was thick with dust swirled upon the wind, and the sand sprayed outward in every direction from the central dune as if it were a carelessly-dropped bag of meal. If he had hoped to bury Ahairan beneath the sandspill, Bisochim was disappointed. She still sat upon her *shotor* a score of *trayas* away, still smiling her feral terrible smile. The Isvaieni still advanced. And Ahairan looked from the advancing Isvaieni toward the cliff and nodded, as if in satisfaction, and Bisochim could not help but look behind himself.

In building his fortress, Bisochim had done more than craft a stronghold of stone and seal it to the cliff-face. He had built it into the cliff itself, digging down deep below the surface of the earth. Behind him he could see the flat sheared places on the cliff wall where the fortress had rested . . . and the bright-shining cracks in the stone through which fire would soon begin to seep. Worse, only the bottom of the staircase had been dissolved away by his spell. The top half was cut into the cliff itself. Though it would be more difficult for the Isvaieni to reach it now, it would not be impossible—especially if Ahairan chose to aid them by turning sand to steps once more.

She met his eyes in triumph, and Bisochim did not look away. He raised his hand, as if plucking a *naranje* from its tree, and instead he plucked lightning from the cloudless sky. Three times it struck the outer wall of the caldera, and when the brightness of the last bolt had faded from the air, the upper staircase was gone.

The stone glowed with heat. It creaked and groaned as it cooled, for the force of the lightning bolts Bisochim had unleashed against the stone had cracked and weakened it where it was already fragile, and as he watched, the upper edge of the rim crumbled inward and the stone began to crack. But he had expected that, and he was far from finished. Once more he reached into the sky.

The spells he had cast scant hours ago had required utmost delicacy. This one required nothing but force and power—but those things a Dragonbond Wildmage had to the last beat of his heart. For long moments, as the cliffs of Telinchechitl moaned and keened above him, nothing happened. Then—softly at first, then with increasing force—a wind rose, cold as no wind in the furnace of the Barahileth ever was. The sky began to boil with dark clouds scudding westward, southward, eastward, until in moments the bright day turned dim. There was a dangerous rumble of thunder, a bright flash of light in the sky, and then came something that had never been seen in the Barahileth in all its tens of thousands of years of existence.

Rain.

Two



Between Sand and Star

THE SOUTHERN STARS were far brighter than the stars of home, but Harrier missed the familiar constellations: the Steersman, and the Dragon's Tail, and the Three Wildmages. At least Pelashia's Veil was still visible, though it was in the wrong place in the sky and the wrong color: too bright and too white. He remembered years ago, when Tiercel had told him that a long time ago Pelashia's Veil had been called The Unicorn's Road and Harrier had hit him because he'd been nine and Tiercel had been seven and a half and Harrier had known even then that unicorns ran on the ground, not up in the sky.

He'd never thought he'd ever see one. But now he'd not only seen a unicorn, he'd talked to one, yelled at one, and now was preparing to summon her here by magic.

Calling Kareta and demanding answers from her was the only thing Harrier could think of to try. It had been four days since Ancaladar had vanished, and while Harrier was incredibly grateful that Tiercel was still alive—since everything either of them knew about the Dragonbond said that severing it meant instant death for both dragon and Mage—the fact remained that Tiercel's survival made no sense. Either Ancaladar was dead—which meant Tiercel should be dead too—or Ancaladar was alive, which meant Tiercel should know where he was and be able to call on his magic.

Harrier shivered, wrapping his arms tightly around himself. It was freezing out here. Deserts, in his opinion, were one of the stupidest places the Eternal Light had ever created, and the idea of putting a city right in the middle of the most desert-y part of the desert was even stupider. Why would anybody—even ancient Elves—want to build a city in a place that was hot enough to boil water at noon and cold enough to turn it to ice at midnight on the same day? But they had, and according to Tiercel, this part of the Isvai had always been a desert. It had been one before the Great Flowering, after the Great Flowering . . . in fact, Abi'Abadshar had been built back when all there'd been was Elves and their dragons.

And the Endarkened, of course. Which were *not supposed to be a problem any more*, because the Blessed Saint Idalia had killed the Queen of the Endarkened and Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy had killed the Prince of the Endarkened and the Shadow was supposed to be gone for good. Only it wasn't, and now Tiercel was supposed to stop it, only he couldn't do that without being able to cast any spells, could he?

And that was why Harrier was out here freezing his ass off, because at least if they could figure out where Ancaladar was, maybe they could go and get him before Tiercel had to go off to the Lake of Fire and . . .

Even in his mind Harrier refused to finish that sentence, because he knew damned well how it ended. With a sigh, he opened his rucksack, spread a cloth on the ground, and began assembling what he'd need to cast his spell. Summoning and Binding (there was a spell for that in *The Book of Sun*) because he knew Kareta, and he knew she wasn't going to want to be helpful, so wherever she was, he was going to drag her here by the glowing scruff of her pretty little unicorn neck and make her be useful for once in her empty-headed life.

One of the things in his bag was his Three Books—the Three Books every Wildmage received at the moment the Wild Magic chose them. Kareta was the one who'd brought Harrier his, and she'd never said where she'd gotten them, or how she'd known to bring them to him, or how she'd found him at all. He hesitated over them for a moment, then left them in the bag. He didn't need them to perform the spell. He'd already memorized what he needed to do.

When Harrier was growing up in Armethalich, Wildmages had been the stuff of Flowering Festival plays. Real Wildmages kept themselves hidden, and you might go your whole life without meeting one, or at least without knowing that you had. Certainly some of his and Tiercel's age-mates had mooned over the possibility of being granted the Three Books, but Harrier had never wanted to be a Wildmage. He hadn't even wanted to be one at the moment he was holding the Three Books in his hands and Kareta was telling him he wasn't just a Wildmage, but a *Knight-Mage*, that rarest of Wildmages, only called by the Wild Magic in times of great danger and peril.

Yeah, right, Harrier muttered to himself. *That's one honor I could do without.* Because the more he found out about magic, the creepier it was.

Take the Three Books. The first time he'd looked into them, the ingredients for the Scrying Spell had been simple: fern leaf and red wine, and a silly little rhyme that reminded him of the fortunes baked into Flowering Festival luck-sweets. But when Tiercel had talked him into doing the Scrying Spell in Tamatha'Iteru, and he'd checked the spell, the rhyme hadn't changed, but the ingredients had: now the Book called for desert lily and date wine. The thought of the Books rewriting themselves to adapt to wherever he happened to be somehow bothered Harrier more than the fact that he could do spells at all. He wondered—if he'd happened to have fern leaf and red wine with him in Tamatha'Iteru—if the spell wouldn't have changed, or if the spells changed automatically depending on where you were, the way a compass-needle always pointed North. He probably wasn't ever going to get a chance to find out.

There was really no point in delaying any longer. He set out his makeshift brazier, drew his *geschak*—it was the knife all the Isvaieni carried—and scratched two circles in the sun-hardened clay: one for himself, one for Kareta. Once he'd set his spell, once she'd come and been forced inside the circle, she wouldn't be able to leave until he'd given her permission.

With a flick of his fingers, he Called Fire and lit the charcoal in the bowl. The bowl was solid gold, worth more than a new Deep Ocean Trader, and older than all the Nine Cities stacked on top of each other. The Nalzindar had no particular use for gold, and Shaiara had told him that something that heavy was useless if you were making up a pack for desert travel. The catacombs beneath Abi'Abadshar were full of things like this, and at least something this heavy wouldn't tip over or be blown away, so Harrier found it useful.

All there was to do now was set the spell. Mandrake and mushroom (the Nalzindar called them stonefruit, and they were poisonous, so Harrier handled them with care), some of the bright red cherrylike berries that neither he nor Marap had a name for (but which were also poisonous), a few other plants, a lock of his hair, a few drops of wine, a few drops of his blood, and his intent, and Kareta would be both Summoned and Bound until she'd done his will.

He picked up the first item, hesitated, and sighed. He couldn't do it. Not even if it was the only way to help Tiercel. Kareta was his friend. She was incredibly annoying, but she'd never done him any actual harm, and she was a unicorn. A creature of the Light. If he did something like this to her . . .

. . . well, he guessed he'd be just as bad as that Tainted Wildmage they were trying to kill. Only then they'd have to call him the *other* Tainted Wildmage, because

Harrier guessed it would only be a matter of time before he'd be sending armies of crazy people to go kill cities full of innocent bystanders too.

He dropped the mandrake root back on the cloth he'd spread out and thought for several minutes. He still needed help—*Tiercel* needed help—and he couldn't think of anyone else he could ask who might have the answers. So he wouldn't force Kareta to come to talk to him. But it wouldn't hurt to ask her if she would.

A Summoning Spell was easy—oilbark, *naranje* rind, and leaf of desert oak (Harrier thought he remembered that it had used to be three leaves: oak, ash, and thorn, and quickly put the thought out of his mind)—three drops of his blood, and intent. It was actually easy enough to change the spell from an outright summons to more of a request that Kareta could ignore if she wanted to, because so much of the Wild Magic was about intent (and whenever he tried to explain that to Tiercel, Tiercel just kept getting frustrated, because apparently nothing about the High Magick was about intent, any more than who Harrier's Ma intended to serve dinner to made a difference to how hot the oven ran). Of course, High Mages didn't have to spend all their time stabbing themselves either, and Harrier'd lost the good knife he'd had for doing only that and hadn't been able to replace it yet. The *geschak* was sharp enough, but awkward to use. Still, he managed to make a small nick in his forearm without cutting off his whole hand, blotted the cut with the leaf, rind, and bark, tossed the stuff into the brazier, formed his intent—*Kareta, if you can hear me, if you want to come, I'd like to talk to you. It's important to me, but I'm only asking*—and released the spell.

Then he scribbled over both circles with his boot—he wasn't sure whether that mattered or not, but it wouldn't hurt to do it—stuffed everything but the brazier back into his bag, wrapped a length of cloth around the cut in his arm, pulled his cloak tightly around him, and went over to sit on a nearby toppled-over ancient stone pillar.

He wasn't sure how long this was going to take.



THE Preceptors of the Light who'd conducted Harrier's religious education had mentioned the Wild Magic, of course, but they'd never indicated that it had any kind of a sense of humor, and Harrier thought that was a real lapse on their parts. Obviously, if the Wild Magic had decided to make him a Knight-Mage, it did. And there were a lot of things that really bothered him—a lot—about being a Wildmage, but there were a couple he liked. He'd always had a good sense of time even before he'd become a Knight-Mage, but now it was better than the most accurate clock. He could tell how much time had passed down to the tenth-chime—and exactly what time it was, even when he couldn't see the sun or the stars—just as he could tell exactly where he was, and where he'd been, and which way North was. Right now, sitting here, he could accurately point to the direction where the Mage City of Karahelanderialigor was, where Armethalieh was, and where Tarnatha'Iteru . . . used to be.

He could also tell that it had been at least four hours—two bells—since he'd cast his spell. After the first hour, he'd finally gotten cold enough just sitting to go searching around the ruins until he found some mounds of *shotor* dung. The Nalzindar who lived in the city's underground warrens let their animals come up to the surface at dusk and dawn to forage, and the merciless desert sun baked the droppings to the dry hard consistency of wood. And like wood, they burned, with a low smokeless flame. It was the primary fuel used for cooking in the desert where there were no trees, and (therefore) no charcoal.

He knew Shaiara wouldn't like the thought of him lighting a fire here in the open. She'd been unhappy enough about his plan to spend several hours outside in the first place. Of course Harrier knew as well as she did that even the tiniest flame could be seen for miles in flat open country like this, and no matter how hard she tried to conceal it, he knew she was terrified of her tribe's hiding place being discovered by Bisochim and the rest of the Isvaieni. But unless they were searching by magic, they couldn't travel in the dark, and if they weren't using magic, he'd see their lights sooner than they'd see his.

And it had been more than half a year since what Shaiara called The Great Ingathering, and Harrier was fairly sure that the rest of the Isvaieni had stopped looking for the Nalzindar by now. Still, it didn't hurt to be cautious, so when he built his fire, he made sure to shelter it in a place where two fallen pillars formed a V, and to block its small light with his body on the third side. There was no wind. The wind in the desert wouldn't rise until dawn, and whether Kareta had come or not, when the sun rose, Harrier would have to seek shelter then—so he was warm enough.

Every half hour he rose and stretched and loosened his muscles, and when he did so at the end of the fourth hour (eight hours after he'd cast his spell), he saw a spark of light in the distance. He hesitated, his hands going automatically to the pair of swords he wore on his back, the swords of a Selken Warrior. He watched for a second or two, then released them, tucking his hands back beneath his cloak again. The light was in the northeast, not the direction from which he was expecting trouble. He didn't look away again, though.

In the space of a chime, the light was close enough to have taken on color and shape—the golden figure of a running unicorn. Kareta. Harrier kicked and scrubbed at his little fire until the embers were quenched and buried in sand, then shrugged his rucksack up onto his shoulder and walked back to where he'd drawn his circles. The golden bowl was cold now, its contents burned to ash. He emptied it into a nearby stand of grass and dropped it into his bag, then walked across the desert to meet Kareta.

Even when she was close enough to make out every detail of her body—the gleaming spiral horn, the delicate cloven hooves, the soft golden fluff that covered her body—a unicorn's coat was more like a cat's fur than a horse's hide—the long lion-like tufted tail streaming out behind—he couldn't hear the sound of a single hoofbeat. She brought herself to a stop a few feet away and tossed her head, sides heaving.

"I hope you're going to offer me a drink?" she said.

Same old Kareta. "Right this way," Harrier answered.

When the Nalzindar had come to Abi'Abadshar, the first thing they'd discovered was an enormous spring-cistern at the entrance to the underground city, but that wasn't the only place in the city ruins where there was surface water. A couple of hundred yards from the steps that led down into the city (there had almost certainly been a building on top of it once, about a zillion kabillion years ago) there was the stump of a stone pillar set in a stone basin. The pillar had a hole in the center, and was always wet, and seeing that, the Nalzindar had dug away the sand at its base to discover and expose the stone bowl. No matter how much they feared discovery, it was deeply ingrained in Shaiara and all her people that water was more than precious. It was nearly sacred, and when you found a water source, you did all that you could to leave it better than you found it. While the water the small fountain produced evaporated completely over the course of each day, by twilight water was already beginning to gather in the basin again, and by each midnight it was full.

Kareta lowered her head and drank thirstily, then raised her muzzle and shook herself, spraying Harrier with icy droplets. "There!" she said brightly. "That's better!"

"Not for me," Harrier grumbled, scrubbing his face with the back of his arm. He sighed. "Thank you for coming."

"You asked," Kareta pointed out. She stretched out her neck and sniffed eloquently at his rucksack, then recoiled and sneezed violently. Harrier didn't know if unicorns' noses were as sharp as their ears, but if they were, he was certain Kareta could smell the ingredients for the Summoning and Binding Spell. "This is a very disagreeable place—although it is nicely free of the wrong sort of people. You should leave."

"Right. Disagreeable how?" Harrier asked.

"Well, it's flat, and it's hot—during the day—and there's nothing much growing here anywhere, and there aren't any trees . . ." Kareta looked as if she were thinking the matter over carefully as she gazed up at him. Unicorns were much smaller than horses, so Harrier was actually taller than Kareta was. "But it isn't full of Taint, if that's what you're asking."

"I didn't think it was, but it's nice to have it confirmed," Harrier said.

"We unicorns know these things," Kareta said archly.

He glanced up toward the sky. The circle of faint stars that Ciniran had named to him as The Oasis was gone, and the morning star that the Nalzindar called *abcha-awardan*—Sheathed Sword—was as bright as fire. The sun would rise soon, but right now it was still dark, and he hadn't brought a lantern with him—or, as had become close to second nature for him these days, conjured a ball of Coldfire. He already knew where all the large rocks out here were, and any light would just have interfered with his night-sight. But Kareta had been glowing from the first moment he'd seen her and she still was. It made her look more like she belonged in the sky than like she belonged down here. So maybe those ancient guys who called Pelashia's Veil "The Unicorn's Road" weren't so stupid after all.

"That's really terrific," Harrier said, "but that's not exactly what I want to know right now."

"You're carrying swords. Did—"

"Yes, I am, and yes, he did." From the moment Kareta had dropped the Three Books in his lap, she'd had exactly one thing on her mind: Harrier should find someone to train him in the warrior arts a Knight-Mage needed to master. Too bad when the Wild Magic had found him a teacher, nobody had specified anything about Harrier finishing his training or his teacher surviving to do it.

"Where is—"

"He's dead." And because Harrier just didn't think he could face having Kareta ask him any more questions (because the answer to so many of them would be "they're dead") he gave her a quick summary of everything he and Tiercel had been doing since she'd left them. He tried to skip all the ugly-sounding parts, even if the story did end up not making a lot of sense that way.

"You've changed, you know," Kareta said seriously.

"I suppose so," he said, sighing. He really didn't want to think of all the ways in which he and Tiercel had changed since they'd left Armethalich thinking they were just going to take a quick trip up to Sentarshadeen.

"You'll need to go soon," he said to Kareta. "I know you pretty much just got here, and you came a long way, but . . . when the sun rises, it's going to get really hot, really fast. But I need to know—"

"Magic has rules," Kareta interrupted tartly. "Even the Wild Magic. I appreciate not being Summoned and Bound—though not as much as you'd have had cause to regret doing it—so I'll do anything I can, but you have to agree to pay."

"Yes—fine—all right," Harrier snapped. "Tell me what the MagePrice is so we can get on with this."

"I don't know what it is," Kareta said.

Harrier took a deep breath and forced himself to calculate the stowage capacity of an Out Islands hull that had been in service sixty years, regular maintenance, crew of eighteen and five passengers, making a three-legged trip between Bralkny, Mirnadain, and Asturlin but taking on no new passengers, only cargo. When he was sure he wouldn't just try to strangle Kareta, he said: "Who does?"

"You do," Kareta said quietly.

"I'm sorry?" Harrier wasn't quite sure he'd heard her correctly.

"I'd thought about not coming at all, you know. If I hadn't, you wouldn't have incurred much of a MagePrice at all. But you've done enough studying of the Wild Magic to know there's always a spell-price, and normally the Wild Magic sets it. But since you cast so non-specific a spell, and let me choose whether or not to answer, you get to choose your Price. Either come away with me now, tonight, before sunrise, or later, at a time not of your choosing, you must give up the thing you most value in the world."

"Is there a third choice?" Harrier asked, because the first choice was unthinkable, and he really, really, really hated having something else—even if it *was* the Wild Magic—take his choices away from him.

"No," Kareta said, almost sadly. "The first choice or the second."

Harrier sighed. It wasn't as if he'd ever really believed he'd be leaving the Madiran again. What else could the Wild Magic mean his MagePrice to be but his life—or maybe Tiercel's life? And they'd already been planning to give them up anyway.

"The second," he said aloud, and felt the shivery sense of presence and listening that meant he'd just entered into a contract as binding as any his Da had ever witnessed at Dockside Armethalich. He'd promised, and he wasn't sure what would happen if he changed his mind when the time came to pay his MagePrice: there were a lot of stories about Wildmages, and not much real information, and his Three Books contained lots of helpful advice on how to practice the Wild Magic well and exactly no threats about what would happen to you if you screwed up.

"All right," Harrier said levelly. "I've agreed to the MagePrice and so you have to help. Tell me where Ancaladar is and how I can get there. We need him back. Tiercel needs him."

"I know," Kareta answered. Harrier had seen her in a lot of different moods, including angry and embarrassed and actually scared, but he'd never seen her in a mood quite like this one. For the first time, he really believed that Kareta was what everybody had always said that unicorns were—wise and compassionate helpers of those lost and in danger. "I don't know where he is, Harrier. I know that Tiercel is still Bonded to him—I can sense that—but I can't sense Ancaladar anywhere at all. If I knew anything else—even a direction for you to start looking—I'd tell you. I don't. There isn't any point in casting a Seeking Spell. There's nothing to seek. At least you know that if the Bond is intact, Ancaladar is alive. Somewhere. And I'm sorry your MagePrice is so high for so little, but it is."

There was no point in getting angry at Kareta. When he'd accepted the MagePrice, she'd been bound by the Wild Magic just as much as he had. He knew she'd given him all the help she had to give. He'd hoped for more, but at least this was something. If Ancaladar was alive—anywhere—he'd come back to Tiercel if he possibly could. If he couldn't, well, the two of them would just have to figure out a way to start looking for him as soon as they could.

"You'd better go," he said. He could already feel the morning breeze picking up—the air was cold here, but a couple of thousand miles east the sun was already high in the sky, and that hot air was rolling toward them like an ocean wave, and it didn't cool by the time it got here, and . . . that made wind. Some winds, anyway.

He put his arms around Kareta's neck to hug her goodbye. He hadn't gotten to say a proper goodbye to her the last time she'd left him, and, well, there wouldn't be a next one. "Take care of yourself. And try not to annoy anybody else as much as you've annoyed me, okay?"

Her horn pressed against his cheek for just a moment. It felt strangely cool. Then he released her and she stepped back.

"This is the last time I'll ever be able to do this," she said. "I can already tell. I—"

"—know these things," Harrier finished. "Yeah. You keep telling me that."

"You are a very stupid and annoying boy. If you think I was ever in the least fond of you—well I wasn't. At all. But do take care of Tiercel, because I've actually gotten quite fond of him," Kareta said, stamping her foot.

Before Harrier could decide what to say about that, Kareta turned away and began to run. Within moments she wasn't running, but bounding, the deerlike leaping gait that was the unicorn's fastest speed. Within less than a quarter-chime she was a tiny fleck of light in the distance again, and Harrier realized it wasn't really dark any longer. Dawn in two chimes, day in four, heat in six, unbearable heat by two hours from this moment. He should go inside.

On the other hand, how often did he get the chance to watch the sun come up these days? He went back, found his place on the chunk of stone that used to be part of a city about ten times older than Armethalich, and settled down to wait.



IT had been four days since he and Harrier had descended to the tenth and lowest level of the underground city that lay below the surface of Abi'Abadshar. He and Harrier and Ancaladar, and even thinking Ancaladar's name sent a sharp spike of grief through Tiercel's chest. Ancaladar was gone.

Tiercel knew Ancaladar was Harrier's friend, and that Harrier was honestly worried about him. But Ancaladar was more than Tiercel's friend. Ancaladar was his Bonded, and nobody who wasn't Bonded could understand what that relationship was like. And having it taken away again . . . ?

Tiercel wished he could be selfish enough to wish for death. Having the Dragonbond gone felt like being wounded—being horribly injured, and not being able to hope the injury would ever heal. His bereavement wasn't even something he could talk about to his best friend. Partly because there weren't any words to describe it—half of a Dragonbond never survived the death of the other half—and partly because (even to Tiercel) it would sound just too much like whining. He'd only accepted Ancaladar's Bond in the first place to give himself the power to cast the spells of the High Magick, because all magic had to be paid for, and the High Magick didn't have MagePrices and MagePrice and sharing the energy cost of the spell among all those whom it would benefit the way the Wild Magic did. All High Magick required was power—the kind of power that back in the Time of Legend had been generated by the people of an entire city.

Tiercel hadn't accepted this terrible gift lightly. Ancaladar's other Bonded had to die to transfer the Bond, and another Elven Mage and his dragon had to give their lives to cast the Great Spell that even made it possible. But without the power to use the spells of the High Magick, Tiercel couldn't fight the Dark. And now Ancaladar was gone because Tiercel had doubted his ability to win that fight and had been looking for something—some weapon, some knowledge—that would help. Now he had less than he'd begun with. No weapon, no knowledge, not even the ability to cast the spells he'd spent so many moonturns painstakingly learning. He'd lost his Bonded, his friend . . .

And he still couldn't quite bring himself to give up.

He'd spent another nearly-sleepless night in the back corner of the tent that he and Harrier shared with half-a-dozen other people. If he and Ancaladar hadn't been able to raid the abandoned camp at Tarnatha'Iteru, they'd probably all be sleeping in one tent now instead of three. Or at least around it, because the tents were large, but they weren't *that* large.

Ancaladar. His thoughts kept coming back to Ancaladar. And it wouldn't stop hurting. At least Harrier had been off somewhere else tonight. Tiercel didn't really care where. He just knew that every time he woke up—the way he kept doing over and over again all through the night every night, his mind reaching out for something that simply wasn't *there* anymore—he always woke Harrier, and tonight he didn't have that guilt to add to everything else.

The nights always went on forever now.

At least this last time when he woke up the Nalzindar in the tent were beginning to stir. Tiercel wanted them gone. He wanted to be left alone. He didn't want to get up, didn't want to pretend to listen to one more conversation between Harrier and Shaiara about what supplies they'd need to follow the trail the rest of the Isvaieni had left. He tried to care, but he didn't know why they couldn't see that *it didn't matter*.

For over a year, Bisochim had been casually tossing spells at him and Harrier as they journeyed halfway around the world to end up maybe three moonturns from their own front door. They'd been stalked by creatures of the Dark that hadn't been seen since the Time of Legend. They'd been stalked by creatures that hadn't even been seen in the Time of Legend. They'd escaped by luck (at first), by hiding in the Elven Lands, by the fact that—for a brief time—Tiercel had actually possessed nearly the same amount of power as his unseen and unknown enemy. But that power was gone now, and it was true that Harrier was a Knight-Mage, but Tiercel wasn't sure that Harrier would be able to defeat the Dark all by himself. If it were that simple, the Wild Magic would have just summoned up someone to become a Knight-Mage years ago, wouldn't it? And then none of them would be in this mess right now.

For the last four days Tiercel had been holding on to the hope that he could think of something. And he couldn't. The two of them couldn't even go back to the Veiled Lands and ask the Elves for more help, because it had taken them nearly half a year just to get to the edge of the Madiran, and there was no chance at all now that they could reach the edge of the Madiran from here. Tiercel thought of the miles of sand that Ancaladar had flown across in just a few hours, and held his breath until the urge to sob aloud had passed. At least the tent was empty now. He turned over, and pressed his face against the heavy felt of the back wall, and tried to pretend it was a sennight ago and Ancaladar was still here.

He was still concentrating as hard as he could on not being here when he felt a presence behind him. Not Harrier. Since he'd truly become a Knight-Mage, Harrier had developed a really unnerving knack for moving silently, but Harrier also got bored easily, and when Harrier got bored he'd thump and clatter just the way he had in the old days. The Nalzindar, on the other hand, moved silently all the time, as if they couldn't imagine a reason for moving any other way.

"Tiercel? It is day, and I have brought you food," Ciniran said.

"I'm not hungry, Ciniran. Thank you." He propped himself up on one elbow but didn't turn around. She didn't have to wait on him. He didn't know whether or not she was Nalzindar nobility, but he did know that none of the Nalzindar waited on anyone else. Even Shaiara, the tribe's leader, fetched her own food and poured her own *kaffeyah* just like anyone else.

"You must eat, Tiercel. It has been a long time. Your body will grow weak without food," Ciniran said coaxingly.

"I'll eat something later," Tiercel said. He couldn't remember when the last time was that he'd eaten anything, but he really wasn't hungry.

"It is later now," Ciniran said.

Tiercel sat up. The ground seemed momentarily unsteady, and the dull headache he'd had for as long as he could remember got worse, darkening slowly behind his eyes like twilight at the end of day. Ciniran was kneeling beside his sleeping mat—and how he missed his own room and his own bed in the Rolfort town house in Armethalieh! Tiercel even missed his familiar sleeping-roll and sleeping out under the Elven traveling-wagon that Jermayan and Idalia had given them. He didn't want to be here, and he didn't want to be thinking about how badly he'd failed.

"It isn't later," he said carefully. "It's morning, and the day is just starting."

Ciniran regarded him with her mouth set in a stubborn line. "Yesterday you said you would eat later. Now it is later."

Tiercel didn't remember a lot of yesterday, since he'd spent it sitting under a bush in the farthest corner of the underground garden he could find. He'd come back at evening, though, since he knew if he didn't, Harrier would come and find him. Harrier always came and found him. Harrier always came and risked his life to save him every time Tiercel went and did something stupid, the way he had ever since Tiercel could remember. Harrier had come along when this was supposed to be a simple trip to Sentarshadeen, and Tiercel had never—at Sentarshadeen, at Ysterialpoerin, at Karahelanderialigor—sent Harrier back to Armethalieh where he belonged, and so now Harrier was going to die too.

"Just leave it here," he said to Ciniran. "I'll eat it in a little while."

"I do not believe you," Ciniran answered with quiet stubbornness. "For these are words that one speaks who wishes to say both 'yes' and 'no,' and this is not a thing well done."

Tiercel ran a hand through his hair, dragging the long blond strands back to the base of his neck. "You know, I'm sorry, but I don't really care a lot about that right now. I appreciate your—I appreciate what you're trying to do, Ciniran. But I'm not hungry. I won't starve."

“Indeed, he speaks truth,” a new voice said sharply. Shaiara strode into the back of the tent. She folded her arms on her chest and raked Ciniran and Tiercel with a withering glance. “He is no child, nor are you the mother of a child. If he wishes to feign injury when he has taken no wound, let false injury become injury in truth—it will not be the first time that cowardice has worn the cloak of sickness. To cross the Barahleth in search of the Tainted One is a journey in which a man’s life might be forfeit regardless, and Tiercel of the Cold North may console himself in knowing that perhaps the Light will send another champion before the Darkness despoils the tents of his family and scatters their bones upon the sand.”

After all he’d done to get this far—the friends who’d died so he could reach this point—the people he’d been forced to kill with his magic—Shaiara’s words made Tiercel suddenly furious.

“Wait. You think I’m *afraid* to go? You—There isn’t a Dark-damned thing I can possibly do now at the Lake of Fire except die—but if you won’t be satisfied until you see that for yourself, well—fine! I’ll go! And I’ll try to arrange to be the first one Bisochim kills!”

He’d always known, somewhere deep inside, that the battle with the Dark was something he wouldn’t survive, but saying it aloud for the first time—even though it was true—was a jolt. But his shock was nothing to the horror he saw on Ciniran’s face, or the silent anger on Shaiara’s. It was true that it was no secret among the Nazindar that they were in hiding—or who they were hiding from, or why. But Tiercel had never heard any of them talk about it. He felt shame for his rudeness, but at the same time he felt anger that Shaiara couldn’t see how useless everything he knew now was, that she thought he was a coward. He wasn’t. If he’d been a coward, he’d be back in Armethaleh right now.

Shaiara was drawing breath for a reply when Harrier appeared beside her. Almost literally: in the way that the Elves seemed to appear out of nowhere, so that one moment you were staring at empty air, and the next you were looking at an Elf. He was dressed for outdoors, and even though he and Harrier had both been wearing Isvaieni robes since the fall of Tamatha’Iteru, it was still odd for Tiercel to see his friend in the long tunic, overrobe, and headscarf of the deep-desert dwellers, especially since Harrier wore the crossed swords of a Selken Warrior strapped across his back as well. That always gave his cloak a peculiar outline, but Tiercel had watched him practice, and knew that Harrier could unclasp the cloak and have both swords in his hands before it hit the ground.

Shaiara turned toward him as he entered.

“If you wouldn’t mind giving the two of us some privacy, Noble’dy?” Harrier asked. His words and tone were respectful, but there was little doubt that this was more in the nature of a demand.

There was a long moment of silence before Shaiara nodded sharply. “Ciniran,” she said, and the other woman rose gracefully to her feet. Ciniran walked from the tent, pausing in the outer doorway to look back once at Tiercel, then turned away and walked on. Shaiara turned and followed.

Tiercel leaned forward and rested his forehead on his knees. “Go away,” he said.

“Yeah. No. Yum. Weird mushy something for breakfast again. I don’t even want to know what the meat is,” Harrier said, sitting down beside Tiercel and picking up the bowl.

“I’m not hungry,” Tiercel muttered, not looking up.

“More for me, then. The only thing that worries me is that I don’t think it’s either goat, squirrel, or hare—because I know what all those taste like, and this isn’t it. The sort-of-acorn bread isn’t bad, though. Anyway. You know, I could hear you yelling all the way out to the passage wall, so at this point there isn’t anyone in the camp who doesn’t know we’re all pretty much doomed. Good going there,” Harrier said.

Tiercel sat up and glared at Harrier, who was sitting cross-legged beside his sleeping mat eating his—Tiercel’s—breakfast. “It can’t really be a surprise,” he said sullenly.

“Maybe not,” Harrier said, “but that doesn’t mean they want to hear about it, either. Look, Tyr,” his voice gentled in a way that made Tiercel look at him sharply, “I know neither of us was expecting this to happen. And I know you can’t tell me what it’s like to lose Ancaladar—any more than I can tell you what the Wild Magic is like. But I know it has to be bad. So I went and did a spell, to see if we could get help.”

“You did a spell?” If there was one thing Tiercel knew for certain, it was that Harrier was about as fond of doing magic as he was of dancing. Less, actually—Harrier just thought dancing was an annoying waste of time that made him look stupid, while he thought that the Wild Magic (specifically) had a bunch of complicated rules *designed* to make him look stupid that it was always changing so he couldn’t memorize any of them. Tiercel knew from experience that Harrier hated random change almost as much as he loved getting his own way. And if there were two things Harrier was pretty much guaranteed not to get as a Knight-Mage, they were consistency and his own way.

“Yeah. I did a spell. I figured that if Kareta had brought me my Three Books in the first place, she’d probably know what was going on if anyone did, or she’d know who did. So I Called her, and she came. She says Ancaladar is still alive but that she can’t tell where he is. I’m sorry, Tyr. She’d have said if she knew. She said you were still Bonded to him, but that she couldn’t sense him anywhere.”

Tiercel had been trying so hard to get used to the idea that Ancaladar was dead and he’d survived—somehow—that he found it almost impossible to adjust to the idea that Ancaladar was alive. It was just too huge. “Maybe—” he began.

“No,” Harrier said quickly, cutting off the hope before Tiercel really knew it was there. “If there was some place he might be that she hadn’t looked, she’d have told me. She said there wasn’t any place she could even tell us to look.”

“There has to be,” Tiercel said stubbornly. If he was still Bonded to Ancaladar, then Ancaladar had to be somewhere.

“Sure,” Harrier said. He set the empty bowl aside and reached for the cup beside it. “But you don’t know where it is and neither do I, and we just can’t go looking for him right now. We know he’s alive. If he’s . . . a really long way away, he’ll come back as soon as he can.”

“If he were somewhere he could come back from, he already would have,” Tiercel said miserably. He didn’t want to, but it was as if he couldn’t stop himself. “And I’d know he was there, Har. I’d be able to tell. And I’d have his magic to draw on, at least.”

That was the worst thing of all, because while losing the comfort of Ancaladar’s presence affected only him, losing the Dragonbond—and with it the ability to cast the spells of the High Magick—affected everybody. Tiercel’s spells had been the most potent weapon they had against the Dark. Now those spells were gone.

“I’m pretty sure you don’t know as much about being a Dragonbond Mage as the Elves do,” Harrier said dismissively. “Or about magic, either, come to that. All we actually know is that he’s somewhere you can’t sense him and Kareta can’t find him. And that’s all we know.”

“I suppose you can explain why she can sense the Bond and not where he is? Or why it would still be intact but I couldn’t . . . ?” Tiercel made an impatient gesture and Harrier snorted rudely.

“Starvation has obviously addled your brains. I know even less about magic than you do, idiot. The Wild Magic isn’t about studying—which is a good thing, since I hate studying. It’s about doing,” Harrier added, in a mock-superior tone.

“Meaning you just go charging into things without any kind of plan?” Tiercel asked. Even he wasn’t sure whether he was teasing or actually angry. He wanted to *know*. He didn’t want more impossibilities to pile up on each other. Half of a Dragonbond who survived. Ancaladar gone beyond his reach, but somehow still—maybe—alive. Kareta knowing the Bond was intact, but not knowing where Ancaladar was. “You said you did a spell. That means a MagePrice, doesn’t it?”

“Not really,” Harrier looked oddly guilty.

“What do you mean ‘not really,’ ” Tiercel said, suddenly alarmed. Losing Ancaladar was terrible. Losing Harrier too would be unbearable. “You didn’t just turn into a High Mage between last night and this morning. Every time you cast a spell, there’s a Price.”

“Not true. I can Call Fire and Cast Coldfire without a MagePrice, and a couple of others,” Harrier said.

“Right. Two or three minor spells that are barely cantrips in the High Magic—the ones that are even duplicated there—and even *I* can still do those. Come on. Either tell me, or I’m going to go out there and get Shaiara, and make her make you tell me.”

“The Isvaieni revere Wildmages.” Harrier actually managed to sound smug about it. “She won’t make me do anything.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t revere *you*. And if you won’t tell me, I know it’s got to be bad.”

Harrier blew air through his lips with a vulgar blatting noise (the Wildmages in the Festival plays always behaved like a combination of Sub-Preceptors of the Light and Magistrates’ Senior Clerks trying to overawe petitioners, and Tiercel thought the people who wrote the plays ought to have the chance to spend a few hours with Harrier Gillain, Knight-Mage). “‘The Wild Magic made the Eternal Light, and all other forms of the Light which guide the hearts and the steps of all people—’ ” Harrier recited.

“‘—the Herdsman, the Steersman, the Good Goddess, the Huntsman and the Forest Wife, Leaf and Star, Sand and Star, the Great Herd, and all things between Earth and Sky,’ ” Tiercel finished.

“So how can it be bad?” Harrier said triumphantly. “It’s just something I wasn’t expecting, that’s all. Once Bisochim is defeated, I’m going to have to renounce my Three Books and give up being a Knight-Mage.”

“So . . . then you won’t be a Wildmage anymore?” Tiercel said. “But . . . you’ll like that, right? It doesn’t seem like a very reasonable MagePrice, though . . . *ow!*” He rubbed the back of his head where Harrier had smacked him.

“When magic starts seeming reasonable, we’ll both know you’ve run into one too many walls head first. Now get up, get dressed, and come and eat breakfast. The sooner we get started, the sooner I can pay my Price.”

Three



A Journey Into Darkness

THERE WAS NO purpose in delaying. Kamar would guide the Nalzindar in her absence. Shaiara told herself no tales of her absence being a temporary thing: Kamar was Darak's brother, he who had been *Ummara* of the Nalzindar before her, and knew well what to seek for in one who must lead the Nalzindar. There would be one among the children who would serve by the time Kamar's years were run. Or there would not.

For the journey along the Dove Road, Shaiara drew ruthlessly upon the wealth of the tribe. Ten *shotors*—more than half of their remaining stock—one of their three tents, water skins, knives, meat, meal, blankets, salt . . .

Did she travel alone, or even in the company of those who were not Nalzindar but were still Isvaieni, Shaiara would not have made her preparations with such elaborate care, but those she meant to escort into a place where even Nalzindar did not go were soft northern boys who had never even *seen* a desert a handful of moonturns ago. If each day there were a hundred ways for a fool to die in the Isvai, there were a thousand ways for a sage to die in the Barahileth.

She could not plan for the length of their journey, for they did not know it. Did their provisions run out, they would starve, for there would be nothing to eat save their *shotors*, and they must preserve them for their own survival. If the wells established by their enemy were dry or foul their death was also certain, for though she was confident that Harrier would call upon the Wild Magic, there was no water to find in the Barahileth. It was not a journey Shaiara would have chosen to make, had she been given any choice. But the patterns woven between Sand and Star decreed otherwise, nor would she let the courage of innocents shame her own. Tiercel and Harrier meant to make this journey whether she accompanied them or not, and Shaiara knew that without her aid, Tiercel and Harrier would die long before they reached their destination.

It was easy to summon up anger with Tiercel, harder to quench it. He flaunted his loss like a toddling child with its first bruise, sulking and fasting as if he had taken a mortal wound, then crying “danger” and “failure” in a voice loud enough to be heard from one end of the camp to the other. Bad enough that the loss of the Star-Crowned meant the loss of their greatest weapon against the Tainted One, but far worse that Tiercel should cause her people to fear their home, for there was no other refuge for the Nalzindar should they leave *Abi'Abadshar*. And to think that *Bisochim* might yet seek them out in this place was a hard thing to hear. But though he displayed his fear and his grief and even his anger as no Nalzindar ever would, Tiercel summoned up to set beside them the courage and determination of a man grown for even weaponless he meant to continue down the path the Gods of the Wild Magic had set his feet upon. And where Tiercel went, there Harrier must follow.

No Isvaieni grew to adulthood between Sand and Star without encountering those who wore the Blue Robes, for it was they who Healed injury, guided the tribes to new sources of water, forewarned of the lethal Sandwind days before its sign appeared upon the horizon, and even—at need—turned its fury aside. Yet if that was all the Blue Robes did, their aid might have been dispensed with, for the Isvaieni were inured to hardship, and the Blue Robes were not there to Heal every hurt, nor turn aside every storm. But beyond those things, the Blue Robes were the voice of the Wild Magic itself, the living embodiment of the Balance. They gave wise counsel to those who sought to live their lives by the Balance, those who sought to understand that which was “good” and “right” and “best,” even when they might not all be the same thing. To those who must lead, the Blue Robes offered wisdom that favored no one. To those who must follow, they offered the counsel of those who had sat upon the rugs of many tents and spoken with those of many tribes, so that all might live together in peace.

Harrier was like no Blue Robe Shaiara had ever met.

He did not come to them with wise counsel beneath his tongue—more than that, he swore, loud and long, that he was a fool in all things, so much so that it had taken her many days to see that he was not. His protestations of foolishness were disguise, nothing more, just as the dappled scales of the desert adder, the dun fur of the *sheshu*, served to hide both predator and prey against the desert sands. It was true that Harrier had much ignorance—he had as little knowledge of the desert and its ways as Tiercel did. True, equally, that the Wild Magic had not held him in its embrace even a full wheel of the seasons, and that he spoke of it as one who thought of it as a thing that must be mastered, as a rider mastered an unruly *shotor*, rather than a thing that simply *was*, like air and sand and fire. He brawled and complained and went through all his days—so far as Shaiara could tell—bawling like an overlaid *shotor* about whatever crossed his mind. Quick to complain, quick to argue, quick to take offense.

But if these things were true, then it was true also that the ignorance and foolishness he boasted of did not gall him, for he was always willing to turn his hand and eye to any new thing with eagerness and joy. And if he wrestled with the Wild Magic, then he did so in love, for many times since he had come to them its wisdom had spoken through him to save the Nalzindar from such trials as their new home might set before them. As quick as he was to argue, he was as quick to turn away from an argument. If he took offense quickly, he was just as quick to forgive. And if he complained constantly, Shaiara had quickly realized that it was either about trivial matters that he could set right himself—cold tea or a wrinkled sleeping mat—or of matters so vast that no one could change them at all, such as the desert heat or the brightness of the sun. And so it was that she would take the two of them where it was that they must go, even though it was upon a journey whose road would only run in one direction.



IT was eight days now since the disappearance of the Star-Crowned. Shaiara had already explained that they must expect to travel by night as much as they could. Merely to survive day in the Barahileth was achievement enough, without moving as well. And so it was that as soon as night fell, the Nalzindar roused their ill-tempered, sleepy *shotors* from their rest to prepare them for their journey. They could have left any time in the last sennight, but Shaiara had been waiting for the dark of the moon. She did not know that people watched over the desert by night—but she did not know that they did not. The day had been spent in preparation: striking the tent they would take, choosing the rugs and the mats, preparing the last of the provisions. Now Harrier went with Shaiara up and down the line of animals as they were made ready for the journey, running his hands over their harness, asking quiet questions.

“Wait,” Harrier said, seeing the four *shotors* saddled for riding and waiting at the head of the line. “One each for you, me, and Tiercel. Who else?”

Even though his face and body plainly showed his distress and confusion, he kept his voice low, for they stood just inside the entrance to the underground city, barely

far enough down the passageway that the glow of the Coldfire by which they worked could not be seen from the outside world.

Just then Tiercel and Ciniran arrived. They were both dressed for travel, and Ciniran carried her hunting bow and a good supply of arrows. Hunting arrows, with tips of fire-hardened wood, were the one thing that the Nalzindar had in abundant supply here in Abi'Abadshar, for there were many birds whose feathers they could use to fletch the tips, and much wood to make shafts.

"No," Harrier said flatly. "Look, Noble'dy. It's bad enough that—"

"I tried—" Tiercel said.

Shaiara cut them both off. "Do you mean me to do all the work of the camp by myself? To set a tent is not the work of one pair of hands. Can you aid me?" she demanded of Tiercel. "Can you?" she asked of Harrier.

"I can learn," Harrier answered hotly.

"Not quickly enough to save us from death. When we come to the place of fire, the army of Zanattar will be there, so we must believe. You cannot convince them that you were born to the tent of any tribe, nor can Tiercel, and all will wish to know who you are and how you have come there."

"Well, we'll, uh—" Harrier said. His halting speech only confirmed Shaiara's suspicion: if he had possessed any magic that he could use to turn away distrust, he would have told her of it now.

"Your women will speak for you. It is—just barely—possible that will succeed. But if you travel with only one woman, it will not. The time would come when one of you must speak. And then we will all die. I shall tell anyone who asks that I am your sister," she announced to Harrier. "That way I may strike you as much as pleases me."

She saw him blink in surprise, and then the corner of his mouth quirked in the odd smile of the northern people. "Yeah, well, won't people think you being my sister's a little odd, considering I don't look a thing like you?" he said after a moment.

"Does anyone see your face clearly enough to remark such a thing, we are all dead twice over," Shaiara said simply. "Come. I shall show you how your *chadar* must be tied."

Until now, neither Tiercel nor Harrier had yet troubled himself with the headscarf that was a habitual item of Isvaieni dress—even for the Nalzindar here in Abi'Abadshar, where so many of them no longer went out beneath the sun at all. Now Shaiara took the long scarf of thin fine wool—as wide as her arm was long and as long as a tall man—and showed Harrier how to wrap and tuck and tie it, and then to pull it forward at the top far enough so that his eyes were in shadow. It would hide his hair, his eyes, the northern shape of his face—and besides concealing him from his enemies, it would do all that it was meant to do, and protect him from the cold of the desert by night and the glare and dust of the desert by day. Should the wind rise, he could pull its folds over his nose and mouth as well. Behind her, Ciniran was performing the same function for Tiercel.

"Don't do this, Shaiara," Harrier said softly. "It's bad enough that you have to go with us. I know we won't get there alive without help. Can't Ciniran stay here?"

She looked up at him, and his eyes were pleading. Suddenly it was in Shaiara's mind, sharp like a knife, that when she had led her people to Abi'Abadshar, she had led them knowing that all would not survive the journey. But she had faced the same dangers they had. And the alternative was death for all. It was different, in a way she did not quite understand, from choosing one from among many—casually, as she had chosen Ciniran—and asking that one if they would accompany her upon a journey where death was not merely possible, but certain. And Shaiara was asking that one to die not for the tribe, or even for the Isvaieni, but for many people far away. But Harrier, she saw, had that knowledge in his heart already—the knowledge of what it was to offer up lives to that large distant thing, simply because it must be so.

"It is as I have said," she answered, and the words were iron on her tongue. "This is a task too large for my hands alone."

He sighed deeply, but she saw him accept the truth of her words. It was as if he bowed to the burden of a heavy pack. For a moment her eyes grew thoughtful, contemplating the days ahead, and the possibility they might win through to their goal. There were many more men Tiercel's size among the Isvaieni than there were Harrier's. And the Isvaieni carried the *geschak* and the *awardan*—not the crossed swords Harrier wore upon his back. It would not be a simple matter to convince anyone that Harrier was Isvaieni.

"Look," Harrier said, very quietly, and it was as if he had looked into her thoughts. "I'll never pass for one of your people. Tiercel might. He's good at fitting in. If we get into trouble, say I'm your prisoner."

"Do not sell the calf before the cow is in foal," Shaiara said tartly. "Come. It is time to depart. It is six days across the Barahileth to the Dove Road, and we do not know how far along that road the first well is."

They led the *shotors* along the passage, up the steps, and out onto the surface. Neither Tiercel nor Harrier had ever ridden a *shotor*—when Shaiara had discovered this she had set Kamar to giving them lessons, until they could mount and dismount and give their *shotors* the signals to kneel and rise, turn, and halt, but there had only been a handspan of time to devote to their schooling. If more than simple skill was needed, they would have to trust in Sand and Star that there would be time to learn it along the way.

Shaiara rode first, with Harrier and Tiercel behind her, and Ciniran rode at the end of the pack-train. This close to Abi'Abadshar, the beasts might balk or attempt to turn back to what was safe and familiar. For that reason, until the *shotors* were well away from the scent of water, each of their lead-ropes was tied to the pack-saddle of the beast ahead, and Ciniran kept a close watch upon them all. Despite the danger of the journey itself, despite the near-certainty in Shaiara's heart that each thing her eyes beheld they beheld for the last time, her spirit was lighter than it had been since she had first heard Bisochim's words at Saphthruk Oasis. First had come the terrible flight in search of Abi'Abadshar, with death ahead and death behind, and then—once sanctuary had been found—there had been moonturn upon moonturn of unnatural confinement. If her days were soon to end, at least they would end as Sand and Star meant them to, with her traveling free across the desert. Soon her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and by the faint brilliance of the starlight from above, she could make out the flat pale surface of the desert. The *iteru*-courtyard was at the very edge of Abi'Abadshar, and so they were already beyond the edge of the ruins of the ancient city. Having left it behind, there was no blade of grass, no animal track, no living thing at all. Only darkness and the Barahileth. The only sounds around her were the creaking of the *shotors*' harnesses, the sounds of their footfalls, an occasional huff or grunt. Neither Tiercel nor Harrier spoke.

They traveled eastward hour after hour. When the breeze that heralded dawn began to rise, Shaiara tapped her *shotor*'s shoulder sharply with her goad. There was no need to seek out a particular place to make their day's camp. One place was like another in the Barahileth.

The beast stopped, then knelt. At the back of the train, Ciniran urged her mount forward, clucking to the pack-*shotors* and urging them to kneel. Tiercel and Harrier's *shotors* knelt as well—not, Shaiara saw, because they had given them the command, but simply because all the others were, and *shotors* were creatures of the herd.

"Shaiara, why are we stopping?" Harrier asked. "It's an hour at least until dawn—three until it's really hot. We could keep going."

It was—so Shaiara reminded herself—a question born of ignorance: an ignorance of a kind she could barely imagine. But even though Harrier had spent the last moonturn in Abi'Abadshar, he had rarely been upon the desert's face in daylight, and when he was, had always known he was only footsteps from shelter and water.

"A *shotor* may go a sennight without drinking, ten days if it has wet forage. A fortnight without food or water and it will die. The Dove Road is six days from

Abi'Abadshar. I know not when we will reach the first well. It is best to spare their strength. And ours," she said.

She heard Harrier sigh. "Don't start," he said, and she knew he was speaking to Tiercel, although Tiercel had not spoken.



BY the time the tent was in place—ropes taut and wrapped around the long needle-sharp bronze pegs sheathed in tallow-boiled leather that the Isvaieni used to secure tent-ropes in *regh*, mats and rugs unrolled to protect the travelers against the harshness and heat of the desert floor—the sun was above the horizon and the cool of night was already long gone. Both Tiercel and Harrier seemed surprised to see her and Ciniran lowering every flap and tying them shut.

"Isn't it going to get, well, *hot* in here?" Tiercel asked tentatively.

"If we do not close up the walls of the tent, the *shotors* will try to come inside, seeking shade," Ciniran said kindly. "If they do not see an opening, they will not move from their places upon the ground—the spot which their body shelters is the coolest, and they will not wish to lose it."

"Let us drink—and eat—before it is too hot to sleep," Shaiara said.

In the heat of the day, when traveling, one did not light the cookfires if one could avoid it. They had brought cold food with them for that very reason, and tonight, before they broke camp, Shaiara and Ciniran would cook flatbread beyond their immediate need. Even now, dried meat was soaking in a little precious water so that it would be ready to cook and eat tonight. Now, by the light of the single lantern hanging from the tent's center pole, they ate and drank sparingly, all stripped now to their thinnest and last underlayer of garments.

Their meal complete, Ciniran took down the lantern and quenched its flame. Closed up as it was, filled with their saddles and harnesses and supplies, there was not much room left, but there was enough for the four of them to lie down upon their sleeping mats.

There was a moment of silence.

"Uh," Tiercel said.

"*What?*" Harrier answered irritably.

"We're outside of Abi'Abadshar."

"Did you miss the part where we all got on *shotors* and *rode* all night, Tyr?"

"No. I mean we're *outside* Abi'Abadshar."

"Oh. *Oh*. Damn," Harrier said.

Shaiara wondered if all northerners were like these two. They chattered like fur-nice—the creature that Harrier said was actually something called "*squirrel*"—or even more like the tiny destructive manlike tree-dweller of Abi'Abadshar that Harrier said was called "*monkey*"—and they never made any sense at all. She sighed, but neither of them seemed to understand the need for an explanation. "What?" she finally said in exasperation.

There was the sound of a scuffle in the dimness, and then Harrier spoke. "We're outside the wards here, Noble'dy. So Tiercel might start having visions again."

Shaiara waited.

"It isn't so bad," Harrier went on, "other than the fact that sometimes he wakes up screaming. And the fact that we've never been really sure whether the Demon can see him the way he sees her."

It was folly, Shaiara reminded herself, to think of them as children, for all that they spoke as children and brawled as children. Each of them carried upon his shoulders the burdens of men grown—and if it had not been for so long as Shaiara had led the Nalzindar, it did not need to have been. Such burdens could age the young beyond their years in a moonturn. A sennight. A day. Folly, too, to ask why neither of them had spoken of this before. It would have made no difference. To them. To her. To her need to bring Ciniran with her upon this journey. But now that what was begun could not be undone, she was free to contemplate how necessity was also madness. In the desert, discipline was survival. They had no understanding of how to survive, and they had no freedom to make mistakes. Not here.

But it was well-said: *do not seize the lead-rope of the shotor before it is within your grasp*. She would wait for trouble to come to her.

"Huh," Shaiara said, in response to Harrier's words. She turned over, pillowed her head upon her arm, and closed her eyes for sleep.



SHE was wakened long before she wished to be by the wakefulness of Tiercel and Harrier. The white rays of sunlight that forced their way through the tiny holes in the heavy brown felt seemed as solid as twisted strands of rope; from their color, Shaiara knew that there was much time yet before sunset. All that might be done in this time of terrible heat was lie as still as one could—and wait. Indeed, Tiercel and Harrier knew that much, for she had told them so. But they spoke now in low voices, too soft for her to make out their words.

"Sleep," she said in a hard whisper. "Be silent. Rest while you can."

In the desert, discipline was survival.



IT had been—Tiercel was fairly sure—a fortnight since he'd actually gotten an actual full real four bells' sleep. (He knew that no place in the Nine Cities but Armethalieh—except the Light Temples—used the old way of telling time, and of course he'd learned the modern one in school just like everyone else, but he still *thought* in "bells" and "chimes.") It was fourteen days now since he'd taken Ancaladar down to the tenth level below the surface of Abi'Abadshar. It was six days since they'd left Abi'Abadshar.

While he'd still been in the city, he'd only been miserable and suffering in every way that wasn't physical. Now he was all of that, and miserable and suffering in every physical way besides. He was constantly thirsty because of how zealously they were rationing their water. When Marap had gone to harvest salt for the Nalzindar several moonturns ago and first found what Shaiara called the Dove Road (because it ran as straight as the flight of a dove pursued by a falcon), she'd said she'd seen wells beside it. Marap and Shaiara had guessed that there must be wells all along its length, and (Tiercel tried to stop his thought before it reached its conclusion, but it was impossible) Ancaladar had said he'd seen many wells from the sky. But whether the wells still contained water, and whether that water was drinkable, was something none of them could know until they reached them. If there was no water along the road, they might be able to make it back to Abi'Abadshar before all the *shotors* died . . . if they rationed their water carefully.

He was sore from long nights spent riding through the freezing cold. A *shotor* was nothing like a horse and nothing like riding Ancaladar. (He wouldn't, wouldn't, *wouldn't* think about Ancaladar: his friend, his partner, someone he'd never thought to meet and who completed him in ways he'd never imagined and who was gone, gone, *gone* and there wasn't anything Tiercel could do about it.) He could no longer use the spells he remembered for warmth and protection. He lacked the power now to use any of the spells of the High Magick, just as he had in the beginning.

He was filthy, sweltering all day in the tent and then putting on the same clothes each night. Both Tiercel and Harrier had spent most of the last year sleeping on the

ground, and it was hardly fair that six days of desert travel—mostly by night—should have burned every inch of their exposed skin red and raw and left their lips and the skin of their hands cracked and bleeding. Ciniran said it was because the air was very dry and *ishnain* dust carried far. Shaiara merely said it would get worse. Neither of the two women was in as bad shape as he and Harrier were.

I don't know why I thought I could do this. I don't know how I thought I could do this. I have to do this and I don't know how I can.

And what made all his misery worse (if that was possible) was that Tiercel knew that Harrier was just as miserable as he was (*almost* as miserable, a treacherous inner voice insisted: Harrier hadn't lost Ancaladar) but Harrier never said a word in complaint. That was part of what worried Tiercel, in the brief moments when he actually had the energy to worry. Harrier had actually stopped talking much at all around the third day of travel. *If we're being worn down this much before we even reach the Dove Road, what condition will we be in by the time we reach the Lake of Fire—if we even do?*

But at least Harrier slept through the heat of the day now, even though it was in a kind of stunned unconsciousness that wasn't very restful. Tiercel knew that Harrier slept, because every time Tiercel awoke—which was frequently—Harrier hadn't moved from the position he'd originally laid down in. It ought to be a kind of blessing not to sleep, to move through both days and nights in the same half-waking daze of exhaustion, because when he didn't sleep, he didn't dream, and when he didn't dream, he didn't see *Her*. It ought to be, but it wasn't, for the simple reason that Tiercel was pretty sure that he had to sleep sometime, or he wasn't going to be of any use to anybody. And he was the one who was supposed to be the Champion of the Light—or so everybody kept telling him. He was really tired of hearing it.

He was tired.



HARRIER couldn't decide which part of the last sennight had been less fun: watching Tiercel fall back apart into the way he'd been before they'd left Armethalich—a gaunt hollow-eyed sleepwalker who stumbled and shambled and had to be spoken to two or three times before he answered—or falling apart that way himself.

He'd thought he'd known what the desert was like. He'd been wrong.

Knowing they were going to make the journey across the Barahileth, he'd even gone out to the surface of Abi'Abadshar in full day. *Midday*. He'd stayed out there until the air swam black and purple before his eyes, until he'd known he was just this side of being an idiot, and he'd hurried down the steps of the *iteru*-courtyard and jumped into the well. The bright shock of cold had made him gasp with relief, but he'd still been in full sun, so he'd clambered out quickly and staggered, dripping and chastened, back into the shelter of the tunnel.

So he'd known it was hot, and *how* hot, and having traveled down into the Madiran from the north, Harrier understood the idea of something being *hot for a long time*, and he'd figured he'd just put the two ideas together and have some idea of what their journey would be like. But he hadn't really realized what it would mean to spend all night riding through the freezing cold—on the ugliest, smelliest, most foul-tempered animals the Light ever brought forth—and then to spend all day trying to sleep in a sweatbox, where the air inside was probably hotter than the air outside and you didn't even sweat, just woke up with your tunic stuck to your body with a crust of dried salt. He longed for water—cold and pure, or even stale and rank—the way he'd used to dream of mutton pies and fresh-baked bread and crisp roast goose, and his head hurt all the time.

Bleeding lips and bleeding hands didn't help. There was something Shaiara called *ishnain* in the windborne dust, and she said it was caustic and poisonous. Once Harrier had wondered why the Isvaieni covered every inch of their skin they possibly could. Now he knew. Shaiara had packed a salve that the Nazindar used to heal *ishnain* burns—he'd seen it in their supplies. But they couldn't use it unless they had water to wash their skins clean first. And there was no point in putting anything on their lips when they'd just lick it off again. He wrapped a cloth around his hands when it was time to pull the tent-ropes taut each night. He wasn't sure whether or not he was pleased to see that Shaiara and Ciniran needed to use the same trick. What he *did* know was that when they'd made camp on the first night he'd carried the saddles into the tent two at a time. Now carrying one by itself was an effort. And getting the tent up and the ropes set was harder each day.

It surprised Harrier to realize he'd become enough of a Wildmage not to think—even now—that the Wild Magic was useless to him here. He might not know any useful spells, but the Wild Magic itself wasn't useless, in a freaky way. As they rode through the night, Harrier could close his eyes and see the pages of his Three Books behind his eyes. They were about doing magic, yes. But Kareta had been wrong: Harrier could have been a Wildmage all his life and never done a single spell. The Wild Magic was about *being*. And he didn't understand how that worked—Harrier didn't really think he was the sort of person who understood things like that—but he understood that it *was*. And so, in a strange way, he understood that what he did was vital and the most important thing for the whole world and that he didn't dare fail, and at the same time, he understood that the Wild Magic could take care of itself and of *people*, no matter what happened. So all he had to do was his very best, and not panic.

He held on to that thought as hard as he could, because his "best" was getting less good each day. Shaiara had been right to bring Ciniran; Harrier knew that now. The desert was the Nazindars' *home*. They knew how to survive here. Even in a place like this.



"SEE." Shaiara's voice was quiet, but any speech was surprising in the night stillness.

It was the seventh night of their travel. The *shotors* were thirsty—they'd balked at being harnessed and saddled this evening, and Ciniran had said they would only get harder to handle from now on until they began to weaken. They'd been traveling long enough for the moon to rise—a sennight's worth of silver—and it lit the desert ahead.

Harrier looked where she was pointing. In the distance he could see a faint straight line of pale silver against the dull paleness of the desert. "It's the road," he said. His voice was a hoarse croak.

"Yes," Shaiara answered, and Harrier could hear the relief in her voice.

He tried not to think past the moment, to finding the well and finding out *about* the well. Finding the well wouldn't solve everything, because then they'd have to find out about the *next* well, and what *it* would be like. He glanced behind him. Tiercel was riding slumped over: if not for the fact that you didn't ride *astride* a *shotor*, Harrier was pretty sure that Tiercel would have been falling off days ago. Tiercel didn't look either awake or asleep, and he was only with them because his *shotor* was.

Harrier had gotten used to the idea that for some reason becoming a Wildmage (or maybe becoming a *Knight-Mage*) had given him an incredibly-accurate sense of time. He knew they'd been riding for three hours when Shaiara spotted the road and that it took them another hour to reach it and that it was half-an-hour till dawn when they reached the well. That was what the shape at the side of the road had to be: the round dark circle of stone ahead in the darkness, looking just like a smaller version of the *iteru* the Telchi had showed Harrier, moonturns ago, when he'd taken him to see the one at Tarnatha'Iteru. Thinking about his teacher *hurt* (just the way thinking about Ancaladar hurt Tiercel, he suspected) so Harrier tried not to. It didn't matter that he knew that Macenor Telchi had died in the fashion he had hoped to die, because Harrier also knew that the Telchi had died without passing on all his training to his chosen apprentice . . . and Harrier wouldn't live long enough to pass on even what little he'd learned to anyone else.

Reaching the well ought to have been a triumph of sorts, but thirsty horses would have pulled toward water as soon as they'd scented it, and the thirsty *shotors* weren't doing that. Harrier tried not to think that this meant that the well was dry. Automatically he tapped his mount's shoulder to make it kneel and uncoiled his bent

leg from around the saddle-peg. While it made for a secure seat—with one leg flexed between the saddle-peg and the high front of the saddle it would take real work to fall off—Harrier still found it an awkward and unfamiliar way to ride. He took a few moments to stretch before walking the few yards to the cistern, conjuring a *naranje*-sized ball of Coldfire into his hand. If an enemy was out here, they'd been seen already. And he needed light to see by.

The wellhead was a ring of dark stone about six feet across, its true color difficult to see in the dark. It was sealed, just as the larger one in Tarnatha'Iteru had been. The lip of the well was about six inches wide, and that left a five-foot disk of stone for them to somehow move in order to open the well. Harrier knelt, bringing the tiny globe of Coldfire close to the stone. It looked like granite. There were two holes carved into its center. He walked back to the others.

"Shaiara, I need a rope. And . . . can you tie it to one of the saddles? And get one of the *shotors* to pull? I think I know how to get the cover off the well."

Once the rope was passed through the holes in the stone and knotted to the saddle, Shaiara coaxed the *shotor* backward while Harrier lifted and pulled. Even with the *shotor* pulling, he had to lift straight up. He had the rope over his shoulder to give him enough of an angle, and the doubled length of rope dug in and burned and nearly forced him to his knees. But finally the heavy disk of stone grated upward, dragged over the lip of the cistern, and slid into the dust beside it. The moment the well was exposed, Harrier was nearly trampled by thirsty *shotors* jostling forward to get at the water. They kicked and snapped at each other, and he, Shaiara, and Ciniran did as much as they could to keep order among the thirsty beasts.

"If it is—" *poisoned*, Shaiara began, but Harrier stopped her.

"It isn't," Harrier said. He didn't know how he knew. Just as he had in Abi'Abadshar—when he'd told Marap that some delectable-looking berries were poisonous—he just did.

"There are times I forget you are a Blue Robe," Shaiara said in relief.

Harrier laughed—mostly in surprise. "I just wish I knew what one of your 'Blue Robes' was supposed to be like," he answered, and Shaiara simply shook her head.

By the time all the *shotors* had drunk their fill the sun was up. They'd managed to lead the *shotors* aside one by one to unload them, and so they'd been able to put the tent up while they were waiting for the animals to finish drinking—a *shotor*, Ciniran had explained, could drink three hundred pounds of water at a time, which was why they could go so long without drinking at all. Harrier had made the conversion from pounds to gallons—for the Isvaieni reckoned water by weight, and in the Nine Cities it was measured by volume—and still came up with a figure that made him blink. But today they could all drink as much water as they liked, and they emptied every last waterskin. When Harrier had made Tiercel drink as much water as he could manage, Tiercel actually seemed more alert than he had been . . . well, since before Ancaladar had disappeared.

"The level of the well hasn't dropped at all," Ciniran said, marveling, when the last of the *shotors*, round-bellied with water, had settled itself, grunting, to the ground.

"It's cold, too," Harrier said, dipping a hand into it. He pulled off his *chadar*—the sun wasn't very high yet—and spilled water over the back of his neck, just because he could. "It's like the *iteru* back in Abi'Abadshar. I think the water comes from way underground."

He went into the tent and stripped town to his undertunic and boots, then came back, took one of the waterskins and plunged it deep into the cistern to fill it. And then, with a sense of indulging in unimaginable luxury, sprayed its contents all over himself, washing days of salt and *ishmain* from his skin. "Come on," he urged the two Nalzindar, holding out the waterskin. "You'll feel better."

"By getting wet?" Shaiara said in disbelief, wrinkling her nose. "Fill the waterskins and then cover the cistern again. It is time to sleep before the sun is too high." Shaiara went into the tent and Ciniran followed her.

Harrier looked at Tiercel. "Well, come on," he said. "The waterskins won't fill themselves."

Fortunately the work went quickly, even though Harrier ended up doing nearly all of it. It was only a matter of carrying the filled waterskins one by one a few steps to the doorway of the tent and tucking them just inside after he'd filled them. Shaiara and Ciniran helped them with the first few, moving them further inside—partly because Ciniran wanted water to prepare the evening meal, and partly so they wouldn't all be clustered in one place. After that, the two women disappeared, and once Harrier was sure that Shaiara wasn't there to see and disapprove, he used one of the waterskins to soak himself and Tiercel thoroughly.

It meant he had to fill it twice, but he didn't mind.



THAT day, Tiercel Dreamed.

He knew even while it was happening that this was one of the Lake of Fire visions. For the last year he'd dreamed of a lake of fire and a beautiful—horrible—naked woman standing in the middle of it, calling someone—not him—to come to her.

He knew now that the woman was a Demon, and that the person she was calling was Bisochim. Why she was still calling him—since from what Shaiara had said, Bisochim had already been Tainted—Tiercel didn't know. That didn't matter. What mattered was that this vision was different from all the ones that had come before it. In the first instants, he thought that what the change meant was that they were too late. But then he realized: *No. It means something else.*

He was conscious and aware—just as he always was for these dreams—but this time he could neither see nor feel. He simply was: aware and present. And somehow it was natural to have none of his normal senses—as if either he didn't possess those abilities, or as if there were nothing here to see or hear or feel. Tiercel wasn't sure which it was, but . . . surely, if whatever he was normally lacked such senses, he wouldn't possess knowledge and memory of them? But he did. And so he could tell that he was not simply blind and deaf. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear, and nothing—anywhere—to feel. It wasn't possible. But it was true.

But if he lacked normal senses of perception, he had . . . something . . . to take their place. And with these other senses, he could tell that he was not alone. Surrounded by others like him (like the thing he was dreaming he was), others possessed of boundless inhuman appetites, and Tiercel was trying as hard as he could not to know what they thought and what they wanted, but that only meant his thoughts focused more on where he was. And the thing about that was that it didn't seem to exist except in relation to someplace else, someplace the others wanted to get to, a place they'd either never been, or hadn't been for a very long time.

They wanted out so very much.

Suddenly he could no longer hold back from knowing—what the others around him were, where he was . . .

He began to thrash and scream, only realizing, as he awoke fully, that Harrier was lying on top of him with his hand clamped over Tiercel's mouth. "No more water for you," Harrier said, his voice raw with worry despite his light words. "Obviously you can't handle the stuff."

"Katona," Tiercel gasped out when Harrier took his hand away. He sat up with a groan, gritting his teeth before it turned into a whimper—or another scream.

"You dreamed about Katona?" Harrier asked, sitting up beside him.

Tiercel shook his head irritably. If he'd been dreaming about his sister, he wouldn't have woken up screaming, would he? The tent was oven-hot, and he knew he'd only slept a few hours. He knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep again. If this was how his visions were going to go now, he didn't want to. In fact, he didn't think he *ever* wanted to sleep again. But in the last instants of his vision, something had come almost clear. He struggled to hold the details of it in his mind: unlike the Lake of Fire visions—that he couldn't forget no matter how hard he tried—this one was sliding out of his mind already. Not like a dream. Like it was a kind of

knowledge a mortal mind simply couldn't retain. *If Ancaladar*—he thought, and forced his thoughts away. He made himself use the discipline of the High Magick to retain as much as he could. *This is like that is like the other*, and you can remember *the other* with ease, therefore you can use it to help you recall *this* . . .

His half-awake mind had given him the hint, and he seized upon it in haste, terrified that he would forget everything. Tiercel had four younger sisters. The second-oldest, Katona, was four years younger than he was, and obsessed with puzzle-boxes. She spent every silver unicorn and copper demi-sun of her allowance on them. Some of them were so elaborate that they didn't open at all. If you lined up all the pieces of them properly, you could drop a small glass bead into a hole in the surface and have it fall all the way down to the center and rattle around. Tiercel had never seen the point.

This is like that is like the other . . .

"Did you ever wonder where the Endarkened come from, Har?" he asked hoarsely.

"No," Harrier said flatly.

"You remember Kat's puzzles?" Tiercel asked next.

"Sure. We bought her a Selken one for her Naming Day last year. A silver pendant that came apart into a bunch of rings, remember? It cost so much we had to pool our allowance to afford it." Harrier had been having conversations with him for years. He wasn't confused at what might have seemed like a sudden random question. Tiercel hadn't thought he would be.

"Yeah." Tiercel sighed. "And Dorese fed it to the neighbor's dog, and so Kat broke Dorrie's favorite set of hair-combs, and Mama said she was going to run off and join the Selkens herself. I miss them all so much, Har."

He hadn't meant to add that. He knew Harrier missed his family and his brothers and his nieces and nephews and his cousins and his *whole life*. But Harrier just sighed. "You did *not* wake me up to talk about your appalling sisters, Tyr. Please tell me you didn't."

His tone of voice was almost enough to make Tiercel laugh. "No. It's just . . . Most of Kat's favorite puzzles were—*are*—boxes. Boxes inside boxes. That was—kind of—what I . . . had a vision about." As best he could, Tiercel explained what he'd just Seen. When he was finished, Harrier handed him the nearest waterskin. Tiercel drank thirstily.

"So you think the Endarkened are in . . . a puzzle box?" Harrier asked, his voice flat with bafflement.

Tiercel groaned in frustration. He really didn't want to talk about this, but he thought it was important to make Harrier understand. "I think there are a lot of worlds, not just this one. I think they're all . . . *inside* each other somehow. I think the Endarkened want to get from theirs to ours because they like it better here. And I think they need someone—Bisochim, maybe—to line all the worlds up together right before they can."

Harrier snorted. "Oh. Well. If *that's* all, we can all go home now."

Tiercel actually managed to force himself to smile at Harrier's black joke. They both knew that no matter how bizarre and incredible the thing was he'd just described, if it wasn't also possible, neither of them would be here.

"I care not if you go home or go on," Shaiara said crossly from her side of the tent. "But what you must do now is sleep."



TEN days later, none of them—even the two Nalzindar—had energy to spare for arguing in the heat of the day. If not for the fact that there *were* wells along the road, they would have died by now. They all drank water constantly. Water was strength, and they needed all their strength simply to reach the next source of water. If the next well on the road was dry—or foul—then they might have the strength to retrace their path to the last one. But to retreat would mean that the Shadow could claim victory.

As if the "puzzle-box" vision had wrenched Tiercel's mind open even farther than it had been before, every night brought another vision, another dream. None of them were the clear terrible visions of the Lake of Fire: unless he struggled hard to hold onto them, they faded quickly, leaving him feeling bruised and soiled. He wondered if he was having them because Ancaladar was gone. He wondered if Ancaladar had protected him from them. He missed Ancaladar's presence so much that sometimes it was hard simply to breathe.

Tiercel knew his constant wakeful muttering through the day made it hard for the others to sleep. He tried staying awake, but the crushing heat and the constant exhaustion shoved him down into unconsciousness without keeping him there. He told Harrier he didn't remember anything when he woke up. It was close enough to true that it wasn't really lying. Once Ciniran offered him a sleeping tea—they had the ingredients with them—and Tiercel nearly burst into tears. As desperate as he was for sleep, he was terrified of being trapped in the darkness of his own mind.



HARRIER knew they had to do something. To arrive at the Lake of Fire exhausted and staggering from lack of sleep would be almost like not having come at all. Just because he couldn't see how they could possibly win a fight against Bisochim didn't mean they should just show up and fall down unconscious at his feet. He was just too exhausted to think of any way of not doing that.

They'd begun their journey at the dark of the moon. Sixteen days later the moon was almost full, its light turning the desert white. Harrier knew that Shaiara thought the brightness meant they could be too easily seen by their enemies. Harrier was resigned to knowing they weren't going to be able to sneak up on anybody. The Barahileth was as flat as a tabletop. The road they were on was the only one leading to the Lake of Fire. Tiercel no longer had the ability to cast spells to make people look the other way. They were going to be seen. It could only be a matter of time. The Isvaieni who'd attacked the String of Pearls had to be nearby, and Shaiara said that *all* the tribes were with Bisochim, so that meant a pretty large camp. He knew from Shaiara when it had been that Bisochim had been talking to the tribes, and he had some idea of how long it would have taken Zanattar's army to move through the Madiran to destroy the Border cities, so he knew that the camp—and the Lake of Fire—couldn't be far into the Barahileth, because otherwise the times—for all of the Isvaieni to go off with Bisochim to wherever they'd gone, and then for Zanattar to come out again with his army—wouldn't work out. The desert was as flat as Great Ocean, and whenever Harrier raised his eyes to the horizon, it seemed to go on forever. If there were tents, cookfires, *anything* out here, they should be visible.

And they weren't. And he didn't know why.

He was too tired to think clearly, and Tiercel was in even worse shape. Harrier decided that he'd tell Shaiara they needed to take tomorrow night just to rest. Tiercel had refused Ciniran's offers of sleeping tea, but Harrier wasn't going to ask. He'd just make sure Tiercel drank some as soon as Ciniran could get it ready. He knew the dreams bothered Tiercel, but if they arrived at the Lake of Fire in the state they were in now, they'd do something so stupid they'd be executed on the spot.

But by the time they reached the *iteru* and completed the exhausting process of making camp for the day, Harrier was so tired that he'd forgotten about talking to Shaiara.



TIERCEL stumbled into the tent as soon as the carpets were laid down and collapsed onto his sleeping mat. He knew he was leaving the other three to do all the work of setting up the camp, but he was too worn out to do anything else. He thought one of the reasons Harrier and the other two were sparing him as much as they were was because they still hoped he'd be able to do . . . something . . . about Bisochim. Or maybe they just felt sorry for him. Tiercel didn't have the strength to figure out which it was, let alone to argue about it.

He always tried to stay awake as long as he could, even though the combination of morning heat and his constant weariness bludgeoned him into unconsciousness eventually, because once he was asleep, the visions began. His constant attempts to escape from them would keep him struggling toward wakefulness for the rest of the day. But today not even the heat kept him awake, because the itchy, uncomfortable, frightening, *knowing* in the back of his mind was gone, as if his skull were a house that he had unwillingly shared for over a year, and the other tenant had suddenly decided to pack up and leave. *Oh, that can't be good*, Tiercel thought vaguely, but the mixture of relief and exhaustion was so great that it dragged him down into true sleep before he could manage to rouse himself to give an alarm.



SHOUTING and brightness jarred Tiercel awake. Harrier had stumbled over him—kicking him in his haste—and by the time Tiercel managed to drag himself fully out of the first deep sleep he'd had in more than a fortnight he could see that the other three were already outside and the flap of the tent was open. "Get the *shotors*—get them!" he could hear Harrier shouting.

"Can you ride without saddles?" he heard Shaiara ask, and Harrier simply laughed.

As he struggled up onto one elbow, Tiercel saw Ciniran, wearing nothing more than her *chadar*, undertunic, and boots, run back inside. She grabbed one of the heavy riding saddles—their shape and their weight kept them on the *shotors'* backs, since they didn't rely on cinches—and began hauling it out of the tent. As she reached the doorway, Harrier burst back into the tent.

"Get up," he said to Tiercel. He grabbed his bag—the one with his Three Books—and slung it over his shoulder, and Tiercel realized that Harrier was no better dressed than Ciniran was. "Get your boots on. Get our cloaks. Get my swords."

"What—What—" Tiercel stammered, still fogged with sleep.

"Something bad," Harrier said. "Hurry."

Harrier ran outside again, and Tiercel realized, as he searched dazedly for his boots, that the heavy felt of the tent flap didn't just fall neatly back into place again. It fluttered back and forth, and when it blew upward Tiercel could see that the air outside was pearly-white, foggy with choking clouds of dust raised by the wind. He stuffed his feet into his boots, and started to reach for Harrier's swords, but then scooped up both their *chadars* instead. As he wrapped his around his head and tucked it, Harrier came back into the tent, gasping and coughing. Tiercel held out his *chadar*, but Harrier went first to the waterskins and rinsed his face and hair. He grabbed his overtunic from the pile of clothing on the floor, scrubbed himself dry, then shrugged into it before taking the *chadar* and picking up his swords in their harness.

"Come on," he said, buckling the swords into place. "Can you bring one of the saddles? Hurry."

Tiercel followed Harrier out of the tent, dragging a saddle and carrying an armload of clothing. He didn't know what was going on, but surely they weren't going to go running off half-naked?

Shaiara and Ciniran were standing over four kneeling and bridled *shotors*. The *shotors'* heads had been hastily wrapped in cloth, blindfolding them so that they wouldn't move. Despite this, the animals were restless, shifting their weight and trying to rise. Two of them had already been saddled.

The air swirled with wind and fine pale dust. After so many moonturns in the Madiran, Tiercel was used to the desert breeze that rose at sunrise and sunset, or the hot wind that blew through the entire day, but this was neither one of those things. This wind was cold and wet, and as he squinted up through the swirling dust, Tiercel saw towering black thunderheads scudding toward them from every direction, filling the heat-whiteness of the midday sky with the gray of water-fat clouds. As he watched with horrified disbelief, the light began to shift from white to greenish bronze.

A storm. There's going to be a hurricane—or worse. But it never rains in the desert. Everyone says so . . .

"Hold these two!" Harrier shouted, dragging him over to the *shotors* and thrusting the lead-ropes for the two saddled animals into his hands. "We have to get saddles on the others. Whatever you do, don't let them get up, or you'll never hold them," Harrier added grimly.

Tiercel nodded as he dropped the bundle of cloth in his arms over the neck of the nearer beast—though he wasn't sure how he was supposed to overpower one animal that was larger than a horse, let alone two. He looked around for the rest of their *shotors* and saw the animals had scattered.

"What is it? What is it?" Ciniran demanded, and she sounded close to panic.

"It's a storm! It's just a storm!" Tiercel called over the rising wind. He wanted to reassure her, but the only storms the Nalzindar knew about were the Sandwinds, and if it was going to rain in the Barahileth, that wasn't actually reassuring.

The others had one of the two remaining *shotors* saddled when there was a sudden loud boom from directly overhead, and if Harrier and Tiercel had heard a thunderclap before, Shaiara and Ciniran hadn't, and the *shotors* certainly hadn't. The two kneeling animals that Tiercel held squalled in terror, struggling to rise. They were shaking their heads to dislodge their blindfolds, and the moment they could see, they would run.

The sky was completely black with clouds now, and the temperature had dropped so sharply that the only heat at all seemed to be coming from the ground, not the sky. The dust was gone—either blown away on the wind, or too damp to hang in the air any longer.

"Don't let go!" Harrier shouted uselessly. He flung himself onto the back of the just-saddled *shotor* and grabbed Ciniran's wrist, hauling her up into the saddle with him even as the *shotor* finished lurching to a standing position and then began to run. The other, unsaddled, had already freed itself from its blindfold and fled.

At the same instant, Shaiara sprinted across the few feet of ground that separated her from the two *shotors* Tiercel held. Like the others, they were shaking their heads, craning their necks as far away from him as they could, trying to shake free of the blindfolds and the lead-ropes at the same time as they got to their feet, but a *shotor* got to its feet haunches first, and they couldn't do both at the same time. It was those few heartbeats delay that allowed Shaiara to reach them and set her foot against one *shotor's* knee just as it organized itself to stand. She flung herself onto its back.

"Up!" she barked, and the command was not issued to her mount, but to Tiercel.

The second *shotor* was also struggling to its feet, hampered only a little by the bundle of fabric Tiercel had slung around its neck. What saved him in that moment was that Tiercel had spent a number of moonturns mounting and dismounting from something (*someone*) who was actually far more difficult to climb onto and off of. He grabbed the two horns of the *shotor's* saddle and let its own awkward rising momentum carry him upward into the saddle.

As soon as the *shotors* were on their feet, they began to run. Tiercel hadn't realized—until he'd seen Harrier's *shotor* bolt—that they *could* run. But the animal was as fast—faster—than a galloping horse, and it was all he could do to hold onto the saddle. Tiercel crooked his leg around the saddle-peg and tensed it against the front of the saddle and dug his other heel into the *shotor's* side as hard as he could and prayed he didn't fall off. Shaiara's *shotor* was a blur in the darkness ahead, drawing farther away with every second—and Tiercel realized that it was still getting darker.

There was another crack of thunder—this one followed by a flash of lightning—and suddenly the air was not only cold and wet, but full of water.

Rain.

Within seconds the wind had become a gale. It was as dark as twilight now, and the rain was coming down with hurricane force. The sky was stitched by blinding flashes of lightning, and Tiercel completely lost sight of Shaiara and her *shotor*. He shouted for them, but he couldn't even hear his own voice over the sound of the storm. He was drenched and freezing—he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this cold—and the worst part was, he really couldn't imagine that there was any good *reason* for this storm to have happened.

Only bad ones.

On his trip from Armethalieh to Sentarshadeen, he and Harrier had nearly frozen to death in the middle of the summer because Tiercel had been attacked by magic. That had been long before he understood anything about what was going on—the danger the world faced, and the part he was expected to play in averting it. At the time he'd only been horrified that so many people might have died by something he could have been responsible for. And once again that part was horrifying. But this time a part of Tiercel wanted to laugh, because once again—just as at the beginning—he was so far from being a threat to the Dark that there was nothing Tiercel could think of to do *but* laugh. And at the same time, a traitorous part of him wanted to hope. Because if the Dark was still spending so much energy trying to destroy him then maybe he *was* still a threat after all.

At first the ground beneath the *shotor's* running feet was dry, but as it continued to rain, there was a thin slurry of rain-and-dust covering the ground, then pools of standing water, then *large* pools of standing water, then large pools of standing water over mudholes. The *shotor* fled through them all, bellowing in terror. Its running gait was even more jarring than its walking gait, and all Tiercel was able to do was hold on and hope it didn't break a leg—or drown—because the storm didn't let up. If anything, it kept getting worse, and every time his mount showed signs of slowing down, there was another flash of lightning, or clap of thunder, and it would run faster.

And though at first he'd worried about his *shotor* breaking its leg, soon Tiercel's hands were numb with cold, and he'd bitten through his lower lip by accident, and his entire body ached both from the battering of trying to stay on the *shotor's* back and the battering from the wind and rain. His *chadar* was molded to his face by the rain, the folds of soaking wet wool plastered to his nose and mouth. He was nearly suffocating, but he couldn't spare a hand from his death-grip upon the saddle to claw it loose. He began to hope that the *shotor would* break a leg—or drown—because that would mean it would *stop running*.

Tiercel wasn't sure how long the *shotor* ran. He only knew that its breathing became more labored—he couldn't hear it over the sound of the storm, but he could feel it—and that at last it slowed once more to a walk. He risked letting go of the saddle long enough to untangle the *chadar* enough so that he could breathe, only to clutch the wooden frame in abrupt panic when there was a sudden flash of lightning. But the *shotor* barely twitched in response. It actually took Tiercel a minute or two—some time after that—to realize that the beast had *stopped moving entirely*, and that it probably wasn't going to move again. He tapped it on the shoulder, and the *shotor* settled to its knees and haunches with an echoing groan. Mud squelched under its belly.

Now that he wasn't trying to stay on the back of a bolting *shotor*, Tiercel didn't have anything to think about except to wonder what had just happened, although “wonder” was probably too mild a word. His teeth chattered with cold. He could taste mud and blood and rain. He remembered what the desert had looked like this time yesterday. And he just couldn't reconcile that image with . . . rain. Or with the Dark trying to kill him. Not really. The spell of Cold that had been cast on him at the inn near Sentarshadeen made sense—it would have killed him if he hadn't woken up and set fire to the hayloft. But unless he was struck by lightning, a rainstorm wouldn't be fatal.

Then he thought about how deeply he'd slept today, about the sense of something unknown and unnamable being *over*. But Tiercel just couldn't believe that the first thing Darkness would do upon gaining triumph over the Light at last would be to make it rain.

Unless the Darkness means to just drown everyone, a small voice inside him said. But Tiercel found that difficult to imagine. Or maybe he just didn't *want* to imagine it. Though drowned was just as dead as any other way of dying. It was as bad a way to die as burning. Or freezing. Maybe the Darkness meant to try them all one after the other. Or—

“Stop it,” Tiercel whispered to himself. He couldn't even hear the sound of his own voice over the wind. A high wind full of rain had a distinctive sound, like tearing paper. He couldn't begin to count the nights he'd fallen asleep to that sound back home. It had been a year since he'd seen his home—his family, his parents, his sisters, his baby brother, anything that was familiar—and he'd been sick and in danger and scared more times than he could count. But this was the first time he'd been so homesick that all he could think of was going home.

He knew Harrier had missed Armethalieh and his family almost from the beginning. Harrier had just been coming along because Harrier thought he couldn't stay out of trouble by himself. And all Tiercel had wanted was to see what came next, wanted it so much that thinking about what he'd left behind was only a distant ache in his mind. Suddenly the chance to go home again was all he wanted. He couldn't do any possible good here, so why shouldn't he have it? Except that he *couldn't* have it, because he had no way to get there, and he was going to die here without ever seeing anyone he knew and loved, and even worse . . . the Dark was going to win. And if he'd only gone home with Ancaladar a moonturn ago, Ancaladar would still be alive.

Harrier had told him that the Dragonbond was intact, that Ancaladar was alive—somewhere. He'd said Kareta told him so, but that she didn't know where Ancaladar was. Tiercel wanted to believe it; everything he knew about the Dragonbond said that Ancaladar *had* to be alive, because neither half of the Bond could survive the death of the other. But suddenly Tiercel wondered if anything Harrier had said was true. Had Harrier really Summoned Kareta at all? Or had everything he'd said been a lie? Tiercel knew that Harrier had lied about *something* that morning. Harrier didn't lie well at all. Was it that?

Had Kareta come at all?

Or had she come and said something completely different?

Tiercel had never been so miserable in his life. Cold, pain, exhaustion, guilt, *failure* . . . they were all painful and almost impossible to bear.

Suspicion of his lifelong friend was worse.

Awkwardly, Tiercel reached out and patted the *shotor's* neck, wanting to receive comfort nearly as much as to give it. His fingers squelched into the wet fur as if he patted a water-filled sponge. The *shotor* moaned in misery.



TIERCEL wasn't sure how long the two of them sat there in the pounding rain. Long enough for him to painstakingly untangle one of the cloaks from the pile of wet fabric looped around the *shotor's* neck and wrap it around himself. The garments had only remained in place during their wild flight because the rain had been so heavy that the fabric had gotten soaked through almost instantly, but even wet wool could keep you warm. He knew that because Simera had told both of them so moonturns ago, when she was teaching them how to survive in the wilderness.

Tiercel thought back to Windy Meadows, the sight of the Goblins in the street of the deserted town. If he'd known then what he knew now—if he'd burned the creatures the moment he'd seen them—would it have made a difference? Would Simera still be alive? If Simera had lived, would Ancaladar still be alive?

His thoughts went around in circles—Ancaladar to Simera to *what he could possibly have done differently* to had Harrier lied to him to how cold and wet and wretched he was and back again. He didn't want to think about how cold it was going to get out here tonight and he wondered if their tent was still there at all and how

far he was from it. He did his best not to think about the others, because he had no idea of where they were or whether or not they were all right. He was so dazed by the combination of his own misery and the endless drumming of the rain that the *shotor's* sudden decision to get to its feet took him completely by surprise. Its feet skidded in the mud, and it bawled its displeasure as it lurched and swayed. Tiercel had spread the tangled mass of cloaks and robes over the *shotor's* withers to sort through them. The horn and front rise of the saddle were still completely swaddled in wet fabric. He grabbed and flailed, clutching wildly, and barely managed to keep his balance. If it chose to start running again, Tiercel wasn't sure he could stay on its back this time—not only was he exhausted, his hands and feet were numb.

But all the *shotor* wanted to do was stand and wail happily at the mounted figures approaching through the rain.

"Oh, come on, you lazy beast," Tiercel sighed. "We've had a nice rest here in the . . . mud. Come on."



"HOW did you find me?" Tiercel asked.

"Wildmage," Harrier answered briefly.

The three *shotors* stood huddled together, sharing what body heat they could. Ciniran was now mounted behind Shaiara, and Tiercel had distributed the salvaged garments. They were too wet to put on, so everyone had simply wrapped them around their heads and shoulders. Tiercel knew the day wasn't cold in comparison with a winter storm in Armethalieh or even with the temperatures the desert could reach at night, but they were all soaking wet and the rain falling on them *was* cold. At least the storm wasn't blowing hurricane-force winds in his face now, just raining straight down. And he thought the sky wasn't quite as dark.

Harrier rubbed his head as if it hurt—or he might just have been brushing the water out of his eyes. "Lightfoot here ran until she ran some sense into her fool head, then I did a Finding Spell to locate Shaiara. As soon as Lightfoot was willing to move, we went and got her, and I did another one to find you." He rubbed his head again.

Tiercel was no Wildmage, but he'd spent the last half year listening to Harrier complain about being one—specifically about MagePrice. And as far as Tiercel knew, there were only three spells in a Wildmage's inventory that didn't carry MagePrice: Fire, Coldfire, and Scrying. While the MagePrice for Finding was (apparently) small—since Harrier had cast it twice and looked just fine—the spell carried MagePrice. And now Harrier had two of them to pay.

"Are you all right?" Tiercel asked.

Harrier looked at him as if he'd just lost his mind. "You can't feel it?" he asked incredulously. Whatever he saw in Tiercel's face made him grimace and continue, raising his voice a little to be heard over the rain. "I guess the High Magick must be good for something, then, if it means you can't sense this at all. Because it . . . *something* woke me up, just before the weather started turning. It's like something stinks. Or somebody's scraping a nail down a chalk-slate. Or if you've bitten into a rotten plum. Or all of them at once." He rubbed his face again.

Tiercel took a deep breath to try to control the sudden pang of fear and nausea he felt. "It's the Dark," he said. "That's what you're feeling." *We're too late. I was wrong. That is what the storm meant. We're too late.*

"Yeah, I actually managed to work that out for myself," Harrier answered irritably. "So. What do we do now?"

If they'd been alone, if they'd been standing face-to-face, Tiercel would simply have hit him. He didn't know which he was most at the moment—frightened or angry or grief-stricken—but most of all he thought: *How dare he ask me to make a decision like this?*

It wasn't fair that Harrier should be able to hide behind not being the one the Light had chosen, behind being a sort of afterthought tacked on by the Wild Magic as a safety measure. Neither of them had ever thought Harrier's magic would be called for. They'd been idiots. Harrier Gillain—the first Knight-Mage called by the Wild Magic since the days of Kellen Tavaddon—they should have taken that as the warning it was. But they'd thrown it away. Harrier hadn't even trained properly. The moment Kareta gave him his Three Books he could have headed right back to Karahelanderialigor and gotten Elunyerin or Rilphanifel to teach him how to fight. Idalia had been *Kellen's sister*. She would have known everything he needed to know about Knight-Mages. Instead, Harrier had complained for moonturns about being offered the Books at all, and now he barely knew anything about them.

Tiercel had known all the way back in Karahelanderialigor that Wildmages didn't stand a good chance against the Dark in the first place. The Dark was the mirror-image of the Wild Magic. It could twist it too easily. Only the High Magick, a magic that was neither Dark nor Light, that was only what its wielder made it, could stand against the Dark to destroy its instruments. High Magick to shield Wild Magic, and together they could destroy the Dark itself. All along the road that had brought them here they'd been hearing about balances—true and false and ancient. Now they didn't have any balance at all.

He even opened his mouth to say so—to say that Harrier might as well make all the decisions about what they did, since he was the one who talked to the Wild Magic on a regular basis—but his angry words were drowned beneath Ciniran's cry of surprise.

"Look! The sun!"

It wasn't *exactly* the sun, but it was a bright spot behind the clouds, and a quarter of a chime later the rain had stopped and the unnatural clouds began to roll away as quickly as they'd gathered.

"There," Harrier said, pointing, and his voice held a mixture of weariness and disgust.

Tiercel looked.

For the last ten days they'd been heading straight south, along a road beaten into the desert by the pads of thousands of *shotors* and marked by the unnatural wells sunk by a Wildmage who—somehow—had the power not only to do that, but to convince thousands of Isvaieni that their city-dwelling brethren were monsters who needed to be exterminated. They hadn't known that this was happening when there was anyone they could ask how that was possible. Shaiara said Bisochim was Shadow-Touched. Tiercel had believed—until today—that there was still time to reach the Lake of Fire before Bisochim could summon the Darkness back. If Bisochim wasn't already Shadow-Touched, Tiercel hadn't thought it mattered *how* he could have accomplished those things, and Harrier, Knight-Mage or not, didn't know enough about magic to ask the right questions.

They *should* have cared. Tiercel realized that now. *He* should have cared about a lot of things while he still had Ancaladar to help him (*Before you killed Ancaladar out of arrogance and cowardice*, a part of his mind insisted.) The wells in the Barahileth—the Isvaieni being turned into an army—the wards that kept Ancaladar from reaching the Lake of Fire—even Harrier being called to the Wild Magic. They were all warnings. And he'd missed every one.

The air was shimmering with water, but Tiercel could see the bright band of green in the distance, and above it, the black ridge of cliff. A tall plume of white billowed up from the top of the cliff, as brilliant and substantial-looking as the summer thunderheads high in the sky back home. But there was never any green in the Barahileth, nor had that ridge been there when they'd stopped this morning.

"Sorcery," Shaiara growled.

Harrier laughed, and the sound held so much despair that Tiercel instantly forgot his anger. *He knows*, Tiercel thought. *He knows what this means*. "No," Tiercel said quietly, before Harrier had to say anything. "The *end* of sorcery. That—what we see—it was always there. We just couldn't see it until now."

Four



In the End Is the Beginning

[HAVE TO GO,” Harrier said abruptly, looking toward the cliff. He sounded half alarmed and half irritated, and his voice made the hackles stand up on the back of Tiercel’s neck even while he found the frustration in it almost reassuring. “I have to go,” Harrier repeated. He clucked to his *shotor* and flicked it on the shoulder with a loop of the still-sodden lead-rope, and the beast grunted and began walking south. Harrier continued tapping—each shoulder in turn—and the *shotor* moved from a slow walk to a fast one. South. Toward the newly-revealed cliffs.

“Where are you going?” Tiercel demanded, although it was perfectly obvious where Harrier was going. Tiercel was scrabbling for his *shotor*’s lead-rope, trying to emulate Harrier, but even though the day was now hot and bright—and *humid*—Tiercel’s fingers were still numb and clumsy.

“I don’t *know*!” Harrier called back over his shoulder. He sounded more exasperated than anything else.

Quickly, Shaiara turned her and Ciniran’s *shotor* to follow his. Despite its double burden, the beast moved in pursuit willingly enough, and rather than be left behind, Tiercel’s *shotor* followed the other two. He pulled the top of his still-wet *chadar* as far down over his forehead as he could, and pulled up the hood of his cloak and pulled that as far forward as it would go. The water-covered surface of the desert shone as brightly as a mirror in the sunlight, and its brightness hurt his eyes. It wasn’t the only thing that was in full sunlight, either. Harrier had his overtunic, and Tiercel had a cloak, but none of the four of them was fully dressed. They didn’t have food, or water, or shelter . . .

. . . and Harrier was just running off.

No. Not running off. Being *Summoned*. And he wasn’t frightened or angered by the summons, either—at least not as frightened or angry as Tiercel knew he’d be if there were something all-out Dark involved. That left only one thing that Tiercel could imagine: the MagePrice for either one or both of those Finding spells.

Tiercel had realized, just as his *shotor* started after Harrier’s, that there was sound (and the Barahileth was always so silent), a background mush of noise that had tricked his mind and ears into thinking it was rain, or ocean, but the rain had already stopped and the ocean was far away. The sound rose and fell, and then, in one of the troughs of noise, there rang out, clear and sharp, the bark of a dog.

The Nalzindar kept *ikulas* for hunting, and so both Tiercel and Harrier were familiar with the swift lean desert hound. But a hunting dog was not a flockguard, with the instincts to watch over herds of sheep and goats to guard them from the attacks of *pakh* and *feneric* and desert lion. For that, all the people of the south relied on a dog that looked as if it might be more than half-*pakh* itself—the *khalbe*.

Khalbes were not beautiful dogs. They were small and fierce and dun-colored, with a stiff black ridge of fur down their spines. But they were intelligent and hardy, and fierce in the defense of their charges.

This particular *khalbe* was so mud-covered that it looked like a dog of clay, rather than a dog of flesh and blood. It had been barking for so long that its voice was a hoarse rasp. But it was obviously grimly-determined to herd its charges—two goats, a *shotor*, and a sheep—back the way it had come, and none of the animals was willing to move.

“I don’t believe this,” Tiercel heard Harrier say to nobody in particular when they saw it. “Here! Hey! You! *Dog!*!”

At the sound of Harrier’s voice, the *khalbe* advanced, belly to the mud and growling menacingly, and Harrier’s *shotor* backed up nervously. “I am trying to do you a *favor!*” Harrier snarled, regaining control of his mount easily. Tiercel wondered when Harrier had learned to ride so well. He didn’t remember—but then, he didn’t remember much about the last fortnight.

“Harrier?” Shaiara asked in disbelief. Her tone conveyed her unspoken question plainly. *What are we doing here?*

“Herding!” Harrier answered. “Herding—things! At least *I* am!” He circled around behind the tiny herd, with the *khalbe* in hoarse but noisy pursuit. Tiercel was pretty certain that Harrier’s muttered curses and the *khalbe*’s strangled barks meant about the same thing. It was all so weirdly anticlimactic and utterly irrational that Tiercel wondered if he’d fallen from his *shotor*’s back and was lying unconscious somewhere in the desert right now. They were supposed to be heading for the Lake of Fire as fast as they could—not watching Harrier try to herd goats.

But the goats weren’t the only animals here in the desert, only the ones Harrier had happened to reach first. The wash of sound suddenly resolved itself—as if Tiercel’s mind had solved a puzzle—into the distressed cries of hundreds—*thousands*—of animals, all bleating, baaing, bellowing, barking, and in every possible way expressing their fright and displeasure. Tiercel’s stomach churned as he thought of the army that had destroyed Tarnatha’Iteru, but that army hadn’t been composed of whole tribes. The young and the old, their flocks and herds and all their possessions, all had been left behind.

Left behind—here. And when the storm had struck, those flocks and herds had taken flight just as their own *shotors* had done, scattering over the face of the desert, fleeing the wrath of a storm such as none of them had ever experienced.

He was on the verge of figuring it out—figuring *something* out, anyway, something about what had happened to the Isvaieni, what Bisochim had done to them—when Harrier, waving and shouting as he circled the four animals on his *shotor*, finally got them moving. Once they were in motion, the *khalbe* darted in, snapping at their heels, moving them in the direction it wanted them to go. But the Wild Magic wasn’t finished with Harrier yet. With a groan of irritation, he turned his *shotor* away from the tiny herd, and struck out across the muddy plain again.

“I do not see why the Wild Magic wishes us to aid our enemies!” Shaiara called after him, her voice wavering between anger and uncertainty.

“Shaiara, I don’t see why the Wild Magic wishes me to do *anything*—but I still do it!” Harrier shouted back. “You should—You should go! *Go!*!”

“No!” Shaiara said firmly—or shouted, rather. It was difficult to have any kind of conversation across the distance between two moving *shotors* and over the background noise of squelching mud and bawling livestock, but they were doing their best. “If the Wild Magic wishes you to herd the beasts of those whom Bisochim has bespelled, then we will aid you!”



MOST of the Isvaieni livestock had simply run until they were exhausted, scattering under the lash of the wind and the rain. Those that had been tethered had broken those tethers—Tiercel was surprised to see even horses here upon the Barahileth, standing splay-legged and winded.

Wherever Harrier encountered an animal—or a group of animals—he moved his *shotor* in close, doing everything short of dismounting and *kicking* the animal or animals to get it (or them) heading back in the direction of the black cliff. Tiercel wondered exactly what the terms of Harrier's MagePrice was this time. Was it something as specific as it had been last time, when he'd been supposed to take swordsmanship lessons as the MagePrice for doing a Healing spell? Were there a specific *number* of animals he had to herd to pay his MagePrice-or-Prices? Or did he have to herd *all* of them? It didn't seem to matter. Tiercel recognized the stubborn set of his friend's jaw, and he could tell that paying his MagePrice was no longer the point. Harrier had made up his mind to finish the job he'd started, no matter why he'd started it. He rode his *shotor* back and forth parallel to the black cliffs, searching for the animals that were farthest from it. Except for the two goats, the lone sheep, and the *khalbe* that had been with them, most of what the four of them encountered this far out was what had been able to run farthest and fastest: *shotors* and horses.

What Harrier accomplished by means of brute force, Shaiara and Ciniran accomplished more ingeniously. The two Nalzindar coaxed where Harrier bullied, tricked where he threatened, but the results were the same—the animals, singly and in groups, turned and headed back the way they had come.

Soon the four of them reached the outermost stragglers of the sheep and the goats. Clinging to the backs of a few of the sheep were chickens—wet, furious, and unwilling to move. Whether they'd been blown here by the force of the storm, or flown this far under their own power and chosen the only perches they could find that weren't muddy ground, Tiercel didn't know, but they spread their wings and flapped each time any of the riders came near and made the kind of noises Tiercel hadn't thought chickens could make.

By now the sky had been clear long enough for their clothing to be dry, and for every inch of exposed flesh to redden and sting. It didn't matter that the air was still wet, or even that there were still pools of standing water here and there on the face of the desert. If they couldn't find shelter soon, they'd die. And there wasn't any shelter to be found. In the distance, Tiercel could see the Dove Road. It was just barely lower than the dun-colored mud of the *regh* around it, and water from everywhere else had trickled down onto it, turning it into a long brilliant ribbon of sun-flamed fire leading off into the distance. If Tiercel hadn't been absolutely certain they were going to be dead in just a few hours, it would have seemed like a very bad omen.

"They come," Ciniran said, pointing—over Shaiara's shoulder—into the distance.

"That's too damned bad," Harrier answered steadily.

Tiercel raised his eyes to the horizon-line and swallowed hard at what he saw. Isvaieni. On *shotors*. A lot of them.

Even after Ancaladar was . . . lost . . . after he'd known it was the four of them—alone—going to the Lake of Fire, Tiercel had expected the moment when they reached it to be different. To happen at night. To happen without the Isvaieni army riding out at them. And now it was here—*they* were here—and he had no idea what to do. Run? Fight? They couldn't do either one. Tiercel realized that if he'd known exactly what this moment would be like back in Karahelanderialigor, he would have refused the Bond. Refused to come. Told Jermayan and Idalia and Sandalon and whoever wanted to listen that he just couldn't do this because he wasn't good enough and he didn't know how and it would be better for them to get someone else—or no one—than to send him off to fight the Dark and assume that he could do anything useful.

Then Harrier was urging his *shotor* forward after another clump of shivering livestock, and Shaiara (Ciniran seated behind her) rode after, and Tiercel automatically followed.



BISOCHIM could look across the long stretch of green grass that lay between the Cliffs of Telinchechitl and the fields and orchards around which the Isvaieni had set their tents to see the frenzied labor of those who toiled among the tents. Men and women struggled to salvage sodden possessions and to set tents upright once more—for those which had not been flattened by the wind had been trampled by terrified animals. Fortunately, even at the height of the storm, some of the riding animals, horses and *shotors* alike, had been either too frightened to flee, or tethered too securely to free themselves, and the moment the rain stopped had been saddled and used to recapture more. No one cared this day whose possession a beast might be, for all were united in one task: to gather up the scattered flocks and return them to the Plains of Telinchechitl before all the riches of the Isvaieni perished within the furnace of the Barahileth.

The moment the storm had struck, Bisochim had felt Ahairan's power over the Isvaieni break like a flawed tether of green hide. His heart had ached to hear grown men scream with terror, for none of the desertfolk had known anything of their actions from the moment Ahairan stole their wills to the moment they found themselves standing in the midst of the open space near the Cliffs of Telinchechitl, far from their tents, lashed by wind and water. But he had dared not lift the storm, or even divert his concentration from it by so much as would allow him to reassure his people, for this storm he had called was an unnatural thing in a place not meant for even natural rain, and it took constant mindfulness to hold it in place.

Still less could Bisochim shield his people from it, for the place in which they stood was the place in which he needed its full fury to strike. And so his people had fled, uncomfortable, back to the only safety they knew, only to find it laid waste by wind and by their own possessions.

Bisochim had not summoned the storm to break Ahairan's spell or even to harm her—the first was a surprise and he did not believe the second was possible, for how could a storm harm her when his own spells could not? But the molten stone contained within the caldera of the Lake of Fire *could* harm his people, and Bisochim's storm had been meant to make that impossible. Even at the height of the storm's power, the hiss and squeal of boiling rock being quenched by chill rain was loud enough to be heard above the howl of the wind, and steam had poured from the surface of the Lake of Fire so profusely that not even the storm could sweep it all away. White clouds had flowed down over the side of the cliff like strange odorless smoke, wrapping Bisochim in a veil of blinding whiteness that was no sooner whipped away by the stormwind than it was renewed.

When stormwater had begun to spill down over the lip of the caldera, Bisochim released his hold upon the forces in the sky. The rain had ceased immediately, and—far more quickly than they had gathered—the clouds began to roll away. Now the Isvaieni labored to salvage their belongings, little realizing that they themselves were the greatest salvage of the day.

During the storm, the heat and cold, like alternating blows of a hammer, had cracked the cliff wall further, and gobbets of barely-cooled rock, like drips of tallow, had forced their way through the cracks. A pillar of steam rose skyward through the now-quiet air, mute testimony to the fires that still raged within Telinchechitl. But even with the immediate danger averted, Bisochim feared that Ahairan would return and attempt once more to feed herself upon the Isvaieni. Perhaps they could not ascend the cliff face now, but if she shattered the cliff wall entirely, the burning rock would be liquid enough to roll forth and consume them. He must do more to safeguard their lives.

And yet, even as Bisochim rallied his strength for another spell, he wondered if there were any purpose to his labors. Ahairan was Darkness Itself imprisoned in flesh. If she chose, she could return to and slay the Isvaieni with a sweep of her hand.

It will not gain her the power she craves, he realized. Just as the Endarkened had done centuries before, Ahairan drew power from blood and pain and death. She would not kill cleanly—not when there were those who could nourish her by deaths of drawn-out suffering.

And so he stretched forth his hands. Bisochim was no Elven Mage, nor yet a High Mage from the Time of Mages, who could with a gesture command stone to burst into flame. His power was vast—perhaps incomprehensible to any who walked now between Sand and Star—but it was a magic of what *could* be, not of what fancies a man might hold in his mind to make an evening's watch at a fireside go more quickly. Did he possess spells such as those, he would have obliterated the Cliffs of Telinchechitl with no more than a wave of his hand, or turned the Lake of Fire to nothing more baneful than water. That Bisochim could not do. But in the morning of the world, the Firesprites had called up Fire from the belly of the world to house their shrine, and every Isvaieni child knew that fire and water were enemies. To bring water to Telinchechitl for his dwelling-place, Bisochim had needed to call it from its slumber far below the sands. There, as far beneath the hard stony *regh* as a dragon might fly above it, mighty rivers rushed through the darkness beneath slabs of stone, their waters coursing for miles before rising to the surface at oasis and *iteru*. In crafting the thousand fountains that cooled and slaked his fields and gardens and stronghold, Bisochim had made himself sensitive to every *trayas* of sand and stone between the surface of the Barahileth and the water that flowed beneath, and that knowledge stood him in good stead now.

Where before he had cooled the rock with water called down from the sky, now Bisochim summoned Fire to heat rock at its very roots. At last—abruptly—a wall of rock deep beneath the earth gave way. Water as black and chill as midnight poured in upon rock heated as white-hot as the noonday sun. The ground upon which he stood rumbled, but Bisochim's weaving was not yet complete. Again and again he battered at the hidden weakness of the Cliffs of Telinchechitl, until at last the rain-soaked *regh* began to buckle and shift. Bisochim's magic was powerful enough to widen the ancient pathways the Firesprites had made to bring Fire up out of the deep earth, and to tear asunder the careful cautious network of conduits he himself had crafted to bring the hidden rivers forth for his use. And these things together were enough to cause the cracked and glistening ramparts of the place of his shame to begin to sink beneath the desert's surface like a coin tossed into a bowl of griddle-cake batter.

On any day but this, people would have taken notice.

This magic, once set in motion, would work onward by itself. At last Bisochim could rest. All the contents of his fortress now lay discarded upon and half buried in a bed of still-sodden sand. With an exhausted sigh, Bisochim dropped down upon a folded carpet.

Water from pipes meant to feed the fountains of his fortress flowed wastefully forth over sand and rich loam and mutilated *regh* and alien grass already beginning to wilt in the punishing heat. Bisochim trembled with exhaustion—just as the earth, as it engulfed the Cliffs of Telinchechitl, trembled beneath his limbs—but neither his mind nor his heart would grant him rest. This day, both mind and heart had led him to commit the ultimate abomination.

He rubbed his eyes wearily. *It is not so*, he reminded himself. This day was merely the culmination of a life of searching and seeking and study that had begun upon the day the Three Books came to his hand. Yes, he had yearned to gain immortality for Saravasse—but even before he had first seen her, he had been goaded and tormented by the sense that the Wild Magic had called him to a great task, a task he must discover and fulfill. Not only for the good of all those who walked between Sand and Star, but for all those who walked with the Light . . .

To hear himself speak of the Light, even within his own thoughts, made Bisochim cringe. Yet in his heart he had always served the Balance of which the Light was the visible aspect given to Men to follow, and even now—in this moment of disaster and sorrow—he could not believe that his instincts had led him so terribly astray. He thought of Ahairan's mockery, of the Firecrown's cool disdain, and his breath caught in his throat. He had been a child when the Three Books came to his hand—a child! He had gone to the Wild Magic as eagerly as a bridegroom to his bride, intent only upon serving it joyfully and with honor.

Have I never served the Wild Magic? Have I been nothing more than a pawn of the Shadow from the moment I first drew breath?

How could that be? If it were true, then the Wild Magic had known, and seen, and done nothing. Had granted Bisochim the Three Books, knowing what use he would make of them. Worse, had let Saravasse come to him, granting him the power to do all that he had done afterward. And yet . . . if it were *not* so, then *when* had he ceased to hear the silent urging he had followed from boyhood and listened instead to the tongueless whispers of monsters? Bisochim looked back across a sea of years and could not say: *On this day I served the Gods of the Wild Magic, and upon the day that followed I was the servant of the Shadow.*

And not knowing was like the teeth of dogs tearing his flesh.

Perhaps . . . and—oh! how bitter it was to contemplate—perhaps the Balance had never been out of true at all. Even as that thought formed itself in Bisochim's mind, he longed to cast it out. How could it be right, when it was the Balance itself—the Balance that he had believed until this very day that he served—that had tortured his senses with knowledge of a great *wrongness* that must be repaired from the very beginning? He had sought that wrongness so long, and so carefully, testing, always testing, lest he fall into error and fault.

If there were no wrongness, he had always been the pawn of Demons, and the Wild Magic had allowed it to be so.

If the wrongness existed, then where—*where*—lay his error? He had sought the source of the wrongness so long and so carefully, testing, always testing, lest he fall into error and fault.

And into Darkness.

You see to what end your care has brought you, son of Nedjed. The blood of thousands is upon your hands, and you have clothed Darkness in robes of flesh and set it free to walk the sands of the world.

He could not think what he might do now.



“WHERE'D the cliff go?” Tiercel asked.

Harrier didn't care. If he got a vote, he hoped it had fallen on some of these Dark-damned goats, because you'd think that after having been scared out of their wits by a rainstorm and then running for miles through mud and rain, they'd be a little easier to herd, but no. One look at Harrier and Light-foot, and they made up their minds that they wanted to go scattering off in all possible directions—except, of course, in the one he wanted them to go. All Harrier wanted to do was chase them toward the nearest *khalbe*—or set of *khalbes*, since the flockguards tended to work in pairs. The goats (and the sheep, and the chickens, and everything else with fur and legs out here in the *mud*) were more interested in simply running off and courting sunstroke.

He wished he wasn't doing what he was doing. If it were left to him, Harrier would just as soon see the Isvaieni livestock keep running until it reached the gates of Armethalich, leaving all its owners to fry in the desert sun chasing it. He knew that Tiercel would say that Bisochim had tricked them and they weren't to blame for anything they'd done, but Tiercel hadn't seen Tarnatha'Iteru on the morning Zanattar's warriors had entered the city. But it *wasn't* up to Tiercel, and it wasn't exactly up to Harrier. His MagePrice was a constant faint itch in the back of his mind, urging him onward the way he urged Lightfoot onward. It wasn't quite a compulsion, but Harrier suspected that was only because he was doing exactly what the Wild Magic wanted him to be doing. All spells of the Wild Magic came with a price beyond the energy it cost to cast them, and if he was guessing at all right from what Ancaladar had said a few moonturns back, all MagePrices did *something* to help the Balance, even if it didn't seem to be anything particularly sensible (or comprehensible) at the time. So if the Wild Magic wanted him to herd the livestock of a bunch of murderous lunatics, Harrier would do it, and just hope that the crazy people were so crazy they didn't happen to kill him on sight. At least his herdsman duties were getting easier. The closer they got to the ridge, the more animals he encountered, and most of them were herdbeasts that wanted to stay with other herdbeasts.

“Perhaps the ridge is hidden in the fog.” Ciniran said, answering Tiercel.

She didn't sound certain about that, and Harrier glanced up—away from the latest pair of suicidal goats—toward the horizon. The black ridge they'd glimpsed just after the rain had stopped was gone, but Ciniran was right: there was what looked like a fogbank there now, and mountains didn't just vanish. What worried Harrier more than the fact that he couldn't see the cliff was the fact that the feeling that everything in the world was *wrong* had gone away sometime during the storm, and he couldn't quite put his finger on *when*. He knew it was stupid to keep his mouth shut about it, but he couldn't begin to figure out how to explain to the other three that Darkness had just *gone away* without him being sure exactly when.

"Let's worry about the riders," he said wearily. "No matter what the cliff's doing, it isn't likely to kill us."

Shaiara had spotted the first mounted Isvaieni nearly an hour before. Her immediate impulse had been to assume that they were the ones being pursued, but they passed within a bowshot of the first Isvaieni riding toward them without drawing any particular attention to themselves. Certainly the four of them had been seen. It was just that in the aftermath of the disaster, nobody particularly cared.

"Thank the Light," Tiercel said quietly.

Harrier stifled a derisive noise—more from a desire not to shock Shaiara and Ciniran than from any particular piety. He thought the Light had less to do with it than the fact that right now the tribesmen had more important things on their minds than saying "hello," and also because it simply didn't occur to them that the four of them weren't other herders.

On any day but today, Tiercel and Harrier wouldn't have looked much like Isvaieni, but in the aftermath of the storm they were covered with dun-colored clay over nearly every inch of their skins. Besides, it was clear that nobody was paying much attention to anything besides rounding up the animals. Here in the south, flocks and herds meant survival. The pools of rain were drying quickly, and there wasn't any other open water out here. While goats were smart enough to go back to where they could find water and shelter, Harrier had never heard anyone praise the intellect of a sheep.

A few minutes later, they passed a second group of Isvaieni, and as the four of them rode past this second band of herdsman, Harrier felt as if he heard a deep thrumming sound. The weird thing was that even though he could never convince himself that it wasn't a sound, Harrier also knew it wasn't something anyone else could hear. It was both like and unlike the moment when he'd known his MagePrice had come due, and it meant that a MagePrice he was carrying—or in this case, MagePrices—was paid. He was grateful for that, since if he'd had to herd every single sheep, goat, and chicken back to the Lake of Fire (and possibly into it) in order to satisfy the Wild Magic, he didn't think either he *or* Lightfoot would have survived.

"Come on," Harrier said to the others. "We're done. Well, *I* am, anyway."



THEIR herding duties had brought them in a long roundabout arc back toward the Dove Road again. When the storm had struck, they'd been camped at the edge of the road. The only reason they hadn't set their tent in the center of it each day was that its surface had been hammered to iron hardness by the passage of the Isvaieni army, and it had been difficult enough to conceal the marks of their tent-spikes in the *regh* each evening by filling them in with water from each *iteru*. Harrier only hoped that nobody found whatever the storm had left of their tent and gear while they were chasing mud-encrusted sheep. Then he wondered why he was worrying. None of them was going to survive to see today's sunset.

The Dove Road was the path down which the Isvaieni were driving most of the animals they managed to round up. The four of them attached themselves to the outer edge of a filthy, exhausted, and loudly complaining herd of sheep that were wandering as slowly as possible up the road. There were as many tribesmen herding animals up the road toward the greenness ahead as there were riders heading out into the desert waste, and among all the men and women coming and going it wasn't that difficult for the four of them to remain inconspicuous. It occurred to Harrier, looking at the faces of the Isvaieni drovers that they passed, that *they* looked just as upset as Shaiara and Ciniran did, and that didn't make sense. Before today, Shaiara and Ciniran had never seen rain in their lives—and they'd also had no idea why the storm had struck. But these other Isvaieni followed Bisochim, and whatever else Harrier could guess about why the storm had happened, he had to include the strong suspicion that it had been raised by the Dark, not the Light. So shouldn't the people who followed Bisochim—and the Dark—know that the storm was on their side instead of acting like it was another threat? It was too bad Harrier couldn't either just ask them, or mention his guess to any of his friends. But at the moment, the less talking they did, the better.

"What do we do when we get there?" Tiercel asked in a low voice.

Harrier stared at him incredulously. Apparently Tiercel—as usual—cared less about self-preservation than about getting his questions answered. "I was thinking you'd defeat the Dark and we'd all go home," he answered shortly.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that Harrier had amused himself by teasing Tiercel to produce precisely this expression on his face. This time the joke hadn't been quite as lighthearted—Tiercel *was* the Champion of the Light; he *was* the one supposed to have a plan once they got here. But the gaping, open-mouthed look of utter astonishment was still one Harrier might have gotten in response to a comment any time in the past decade.

"You've still got a few minutes to come up with a plan," he added.

"Oh," Tiercel said, very quietly.

Neither Ciniran nor Shaiara said anything at all, but Harrier could practically feel disgust radiating from both women as they got closer to their destination. You didn't have to be a Wildmage to know that the Nalzindar revered the Balance the way he and Tiercel had been taught to revere the Eternal Light—and not just *the* Balance, but *balance*—making everything come out right, never being too greedy, never spoiling a place by taking too much from it or trying to make it into something it wasn't supposed to be. He and Tiercel were worried for another reason. They'd been in the Madiran for three moonturns, and in the Barahileth for the last moonturn and a half, and if there was one thing that both of them had gotten drummed into their northerner heads over and over, it was that water was scarce and the land was harsh.

But what the Dove Road led into could have been dropped down anywhere in the Armen Plains and looked perfectly normal. In fact, it looked as if it had been picked up *from* the Armen Plains—or even the Delfier Valley—and dropped down *here*. Hectare upon hectare of lush green grass—some grazed down by the sheep and goats, some fenced off with stone walls. Beyond the walls was what looked like oats, or maybe barley. Lots of oats—or barley. Hectares of it.

There were trees, laid out in neat plantations. *Naranjes*, *limuns*, and he thought he saw apple trees as well. It was at least another mile to what Harrier still had to call the oasis—since he didn't have anything else to call it—and the belt of green (trees, crops, *grass*) stretched out along both sides of the Dove Road and seemed to go on for several miles. In the distance, scattered among the trees, he could see the tents of the enemy, far more of them than had been set outside the walls of Tarnatha'Iteru. He didn't want to think about the amount of sheer *power* the existence of this place represented. He couldn't imagine making something like this himself. Not just because magic still seemed to him like cheating, but because he didn't think this was the kind of thing the Wild Magic was supposed to do. When Tiercel had turned Tarnatha'Iteru into water, he'd thought Tiercel'd had more power than he could imagine. But he couldn't imagine even *Tiercel* making something like this. He glanced sideways, and one look at Tiercel's face told Harrier everything he needed to know. Tiercel had come to pretty much the same conclusions. They were riding into the Dark's stronghold, and the Dark had so much power that even *with* Ancaladar's magic for Tiercel to draw on Tiercel wouldn't have had as much power as it did.

As they rode closer, the quality of the air around them began to change. It wasn't the temporary humidity of a parched desert after a rainstorm. The air here smelled

more like the underground gardens at Abi'Abadshar, and Harrier realized it must always be wet. Grass like this didn't grow overnight. And even if it had—because a Mage who could make a place like this could probably do anything he wanted to—this place couldn't have just been created *yesterday*. The grass was here to feed the goats and the sheep, so that meant it had been here . . . at least as long as the goats and sheep had. Most of a year.

Harrier wondered if this place had been here even longer. He wondered if it had been here even before they'd left Karahelanderialigor. He wondered if the Elves had known that everything he and Tiercel were going to do—their journey, coming to try to destroy the Dark—was going to be useless before they began. He wondered if that was the real reason Ancaladar had vanished. He wondered if Kareta had known that, and about this, and if he'd just asked her the wrong questions. Thinking about Kareta made Harrier think of the MagePrice he still owed for Summoning her: "*at a time not of your choosing, you must give up the thing you most value in the world,*" she'd said. He wondered what the Wild Magic thought was the thing he valued most in the world. Light knew it couldn't be his life, since he'd been doing his best to throw it away at least once a sennight for the last year.



THE *shotors* began moving more eagerly the closer they got to the oasis. They could smell water and forage, and what that meant to the exhausted creatures was the opportunity to lie down and rest. Though they didn't need to drink, they would if they got the chance. For their riders, the need for water was more urgent.

Harrier glanced toward Shaiara. If any of their plans had gone at all as they'd intended them to, they would all have been properly dressed, the encampment they were preparing to enter wouldn't have been buzzing like a walloped wasp's nest, and he would've had one last chance to try to talk Shaiara and Ciniran into staying behind. No chance of that now. He managed to slow Lightfoot a bit and turn her aside from the herd. He was grateful that the old cow-*shotor* was the mount he'd grabbed in the chaos. She was steady and reliable, even if she *was* foul-tempered and ugly. Shaiara, taking his cue, rode up beside him.

"What do we do when we get there?" he asked her, keeping his voice to the barest murmur. "They'll know Tyr and I aren't Isvaieni, even if we *are* covered in mud. But we have to have water."

Shaiara nodded briefly, her teeth worrying her lower lip as she thought. "I think no one will look closely at you this day, and that is well. Once we have drunk, we will steal clothing, then seek out the Shadow-Touched and slay him. Then all shall be as Sand and Star wills."

"Yeah," Harrier said with a sigh. "Right."



THE grass simply started. One moment there was *regh*, and the next moment there was grass, its bright greenness shocking in the no-color desert palette of brown and dun and tan. The dividing point was as sharp as if the desert had been cut by a knife. Harrier could see the air sparkling with rainbows from the water jetting into the air from fountains that were little more than pipes jutting out of the ground.

Here, as in the fields outside the *iteru*-cities, everything was irrigated by canal; the fountains, Harrier quickly realized, were to lower the temperature of the air rather than to provide a water source for any of the growing things. But that meant that when the animals the Isvaieni were herding reached the first of the channels dug between the trees, they stopped and began to fan out along its length to drink. The Isvaieni immediately dismounted and began shouting orders to the *khalbes*. The flockguards, barking and snapping, worked to get the animals moving again, but for a few moments, all was confusion.

"We must go now," Shaiara said, gesturing because her words couldn't really be heard. She tapped her *shotor* on its shoulder to make it kneel, and the rest of them followed suit.

Harrier remembered Tamatha'Iteru the night of the attack, and the sudden terror he'd felt knowing Consul Aldarnas's plan had failed, and the moment the fear had just . . . stopped. That was how he felt now. "Where are we going?" he asked Shaiara. When he dismounted from his saddle, crusts of dried clay cracked and broke—his tunic was no longer the brown of undyed wool, but the light tan of mud. He hadn't been able to hear the sound of his own voice over the noise all around them, and stepped closer to her to hear her reply.

"The storm has struck here as well, yet if the tents have been set as they would be at a Gathering of the Tribes, I know which tents lie where. There is no charity between Sand and Star, as well you know, nor will I steal from those who cannot spare it. Tunag and Zarungad are people of the deep desert. They have little. But the Kareggi are numerous and wealthy, and will not be injured by this loss." Shaiara stopped speaking then, and Harrier knew why. The next part of the plan was supposed to be theirs. And from the time Harrier and Tiercel had known there *was* an enemy, their plan had been insanely simple: go find that enemy and stop him. They'd always been going to work out the details later. Only "later" had become "now."

Harrier looked at Tiercel. Tiercel still looked more stunned than anything else, and Harrier realized that the fact that he wasn't afraid wasn't because of any gift of the Wild Magic, but was because he was *angry*. He and Tiercel weren't ready for this. They never could have been. He saw Tiercel take a deep breath and shake himself, as if he were waking himself up.

"We . . . We'll find out where he is. And we'll go talk to him," Tiercel said shakily.

"Right," Harrier said. It was an effort to keep his voice even, but he managed.

He turned and lifted the saddle from Lightfoot's back—because unsaddled, the *shotors* would blend in better—and looped her lead-rope around her neck and through her halter. Shaiara and Ciniran did the same with their *shotors*, and then helped Tiercel with his animal. Nobody paid any attention to them as they walked up along and through the swirling mass of dogs and livestock in the direction of the tents.

Grass and earth—very wet and muddy earth—felt strange under the soles of his boots, and he was grateful that Tiercel had been able to grab their cloaks in the first moments of the storm. He needed his cloak to conceal his swords; Tiercel needed his to hide as much of himself as he could. They all had their boots and their *chadars*, but Harrier was the only one wearing more than his undertunic, since he'd managed to drag on his outer tunic before they'd fled.

All around them, the ground was covered with leaves and storm-downed branches. All the trees were in full leaf—Shaiara said it was summer, so that made sense—and the green glossy leaves and globes of ripening fruit just added another layer of unreality to a situation that was already unreal. This was the depths of the harshest desert anywhere. Harrier had gotten used to the way it looked. It didn't look like this.

He'd also gotten used to being alone, because there were only thirty people in Shaiara's entire tribe, and he'd spent most of his days chasing Tiercel around Abi'Abadshar's basement anyway. But here there were people everywhere you looked. Kids climbing the trees, trying to bring down the falcons roosting there (the falcons only hissed miserably at anyone who came near them and sometimes climbed higher), kids waving sticks, trying to chase chickens down out of other trees (the chickens were too busy watching the falcons to pay any attention to the sticks). It would all have been funny, if they weren't here to kill a Darkspawn Mage who was almost certainly going to kill them instead.

They stopped at the first fountain-jet they saw, cupping their hands around the spray to wash them and then to fill them with water. The water was icy cold as it left the short length of bronze pipe, and Harrier wondered how it was made to come up out of the ground with so much force. He'd probably never know. When they'd drunk as much as they had patience for, they walked on. He was relieved to see that the four of them weren't any more badly dressed than a lot of the people they saw. And a lot of them were just as mud-covered.

He'd first thought that the Isvaieni tents were pitched among the trees, but he'd been wrong. They were too large and too numerous for that. They were pitched beyond it, on another open expanse of grass. *Just as if somebody picked up the Armen Plain and dropped it here . . .*

The storm had obviously hit the camp hard and fast. A third of the tents were still down—smashed flat by the storm—but people were moving to put them back up even as Harrier watched. Harrier tried not to worry at the number of tents he saw. There were more than there'd been outside Tarnatha'Iteru—maybe twice as many. Most of them were like Shaiara's—a no-particular-color like wood-ash—because they were made of felted wool from the coats of sheep and goats and *shotors*, but he could see that a few of the tents were black. And a few of them were a different shape, as if two of the regular tents had been put together to make an extra-large one. Most of the carpets—every Isvaieni's tent was floored with carpets—were laid out in the sun to dry, and the colors were brilliant: reds and dark blues and greens and yellows. In the Nine Cities, they called them Madiran rugs, and they fetched stunning prices in the marketplace. Here, they were as much a necessity as good cookstone or an iron skillet. Or a belt-knife. Harrier touched his waist uneasily. He didn't have his waist-sash and over-robe, let alone his *geschak*. All he had was his Selken blades, and he was lucky to have grabbed them in the storm. And his Three Books, of course, but if he'd left them behind, he was sure they'd have found a way to turn up somehow. He frowned. There was something somehow *wrong* about the tents, as if they weren't arranged properly. Harrier shook his head, feeling as if it were suddenly overfull, and sighed sharply with irritation. There was no possible way he could know the right way for an Isvaieni camp to be set up. And whether it was right or wrong, it couldn't make a lot of difference now. But . . .

"So few?" Shaiara said, looking at the encampment. She sounded shaken.

"I'm sorry," Tiercel said quietly. "Uh . . . Har?" Tiercel added, reaching out to touch his arm.

His voice and his touch wrenched Harrier's attention away from the encampment, and the thing he'd been on the edge of figuring out vanished. There was an odd note in Tiercel's voice—not danger, not panic, just sheer disbelief—and right now it just made Harrier want to *smack him*, because if it wasn't something urgent enough or dangerous enough to actually upset him, Harrier didn't want to know about it. But if he yelled, he'd only attract unwanted attention, so he took a very deep breath.

"Yes, Tiercel, what is it?" he said evenly.

"The cliffs, Har. They're gone."

Harrier hadn't actually been paying much attention to the cliffs, since he'd only seen them distantly and indistinctly before they'd vanished behind a bank of clouds. When they'd gotten closer to their destination, his attention had been on things close at hand: sheep, goats, people who might be about to kill them. Now he looked up. Beyond the far edge of the tents, perhaps two miles in the distance, there was still a shifting blanket of white. It looked like fog, or maybe steam. In Harrier's opinion, it could be whatever it wanted to be. There were apple trees growing in the middle of the Barahileth. Anything was possible. But the mist-steam-fog wasn't as thick now, and it was being blown by the wind that always rose an hour or two before sunset, and as gaps appeared in the mist, Harrier could see what Tiercel had seen. There was nothing behind it. No cliff. Just desert. He turned to Tiercel.

"Considering the fact that we never saw *this* place at all until a couple of hours ago, the fact that a cliff has mysteriously vanished doesn't worry me. Maybe it was never there." *For Light's sake, think of why you're here, Tyr!* "Maybe it *has* vanished. It doesn't matter."

"I guess. But I thought—"

"Come! Come and eat!"

The woman who hailed them sat on a carpet in the open doorway of her tent, beneath the shade of an awning. Unlike the Nalzindar—or the half-dressed, mud-covered Isvaieni Harrier had seen so far—her clothing was both bright and elaborate. Her *chadar* had a pattern of red stripes woven into the pale wool, and her long open vest was black. Her overtunic was a dark brown—it had to have been dyed, since *shotor*-wool was a lighter color—and the undertunic beneath it was so pale it had to have been bleached. There were two large waterjars beside her upon the carpet, and a younger woman sat beside her, tending a *kaffeyah*-brazier. She, too, was dressed brightly, in a brown vest and green tunic, though her *chadar* matched the older woman's. Harrier remembered Shaiara telling him once that how the *chadar* was knotted and folded told anyone who saw it what tribe you belonged to. He wondered if that went for the colors as well.

"Your pardon, *Ummara* Liapha. We are not Kadyastar," Shaiara called back. She started to move on.

"*One of us is sun-touched, girl*," the woman Shaiara had called Liapha snapped, her voice clearly audible to the four of them. From the way Shaiara stopped and her back straightened, Harrier suspected that nobody had called her "girl" in that tone of voice for quite a while—if ever.

"Now come. Sit. Eat. Rinurta, show them that they are welcome!"

The girl sitting by Liapha's side got to her feet and walked toward them, obviously intending to conduct them back to her relative's side.

"They are *Kadyastar*," Ciniran said in soft tones of disbelief.

"*There is no charity between Sand and Star, as well you know.*" Shaiara had said that—again only a few moments ago. That Isvaieni custom was alien to everything Harrier had grown up with, for the Gillain family—like all those in Armethalich who lived by Great Ocean—also lived by the *law* of Great Ocean, whether on ship or on shore, and that law held that all who sailed upon Great Ocean were kin, never to be denied aid or succor. But the desert was even more unforgiving than Great Ocean. To give charity to another today might be to doom your own family tomorrow. No wonder Ciniran was shocked.

"Maybe they know where Bisochim is," Tiercel suggested, as if trying to make the best of a bad situation.

"Sure they do," Harrier said sourly. "We'll ask them, they'll tell us, we'll go find him, we won't have any more problems. For—" He stopped talking abruptly as Rinurta reached them. There was nothing to do but follow her back to Liapha's tent.

If Harrier and Tiercel had not been living among the Nalzindar for the last moonturn, the deception would have been doomed from the outset. But they knew where to sit on an Isvaieni carpet, and *how* to sit. They could see, now that they were close to her, that Liapha was old—the oldest Isvaieni either of them had ever seen. Her skin was as dark as polished maple, and seamed with a thousand tiny wrinkles. And the sash at her waist was not only brightly striped in a rainbow of colors, Harrier would have been willing to bet the four silver stars he'd given Carault two years ago to invest in cargo for him that it was *silk*. And not Dragon's Tail silk either, but *Selken Isles* silk, shipped across Great Ocean at ruinous cost to its eventual buyer. Liapha was a wealthy woman, even setting aside the fact that the carpet Harrier was currently grinding *mud* into would change hands even at warehouse prices up north for enough to let Liapha dress herself from head to foot in Selken silk.

Now who isn't paying attention? he asked himself. He looked around as best he could without turning his head. The tent itself had been set up not as living space, but as a central kitchen designed to feed dozens, even scores, of people, and the good smells coming from inside it made Harrier's stomach rumble.

Rinurta served the four of them with large mugs of water from the covered clay jars, and then knelt on the rug to prepare *kaffeyah*. Harrier had spent enough time with the Nalzindar to know that preparing the *kaffeyah* was considered a mark of honor. Liapha might have been doing it herself if she were younger. Her *chadar* covered her hair, but her hands and face were withered and wrinkled with the passage of years. As the *kaffeyah* was simmering in the pan, several Isvaieni walked into the tent—nodding to Liapha as they passed—and received flatcakes and bowls of food. From the carefully-blank expressions on Ciniran's and Shaiara's faces, Harrier guessed there was something even stranger about that than about them having been invited to dinner by a Kadyastar. While he and Tiercel had managed to drink without unwrapping their *chadars*, Harrier was already trying to think about how they could get out of here without eating anything, because they'd certainly have to unwrap themselves to do that, and as soon as either he or Tiercel exposed their faces, it would be obvious that they weren't Isvaieni.

When the *kaffeyah* was ready, Rinurta poured it deftly from the flat pan into the carved bone cups waiting on the tray, then carried the tray around, serving Liapha

first. Ciniran sat at Shaiara's side, head bowed and still, looking as if she wanted to be anywhere but here. When they'd all been served, Liapha sent Rinurta into the tent, saying she must bring bread and dates for their guests.

"Did you think I would not recognize you, Shaiara?" Liapha said, as soon as Rinurta was gone. "Only the Nalzindar do not know that the time of the Breaking of Tribes has come—and you have much the look of Ganima about you."

Harrier saw Ciniran raise her head abruptly, her mouth opening as if she wanted to argue with Liapha. But it was Shaiara who spoke.

"Ganima went to lay her bones upon the sand before my eyes first opened upon the day," Shaiara said sharply. "The Nalzindar look to no tents save our own."

Liapha nodded, as if Shaiara had said just what she'd expected. "That has always been the way of those who journey between Sand and Star—and so I thought it would always be. Ganima was always my favorite, you know. Indeed, it might have been that it was she who held the Kadyastar after me, and not Hadyan. But she would have what she would have. I see she has passed that willfulness on to her daughter."

"I serve," Shaiara answered, and there was steel in her voice.

"Do you?" Liapha answered mildly. "What do you serve?"

"I shall tell you what I do *not* serve, Liapha of the Kadyastar. I do not serve Shadow as its *ikulas*, as the Isvaieni did when they went forth at Bisochim's order to destroy the String of Pearls." There was nothing but contempt in Shaiara's voice.

Harrier concentrated on the cup of *kaffeyah* he held in his hands. He didn't dare look at Tiercel, or Ciniran, or at anything else, for fear of giving too much away. They'd walked into the enemy's stronghold, and right up to someone who not only recognized Shaiara as Nalzindar, but as *Shaiara*. And now Shaiara was *arguing* with her.

Liapha blinked slowly, and sipped her *kaffeyah*. She did not answer immediately. "But Bisochim did not order it. He sent Zanattar and the rest of the young hunters out into the Isvai to search for you, for the Nalzindar were not to be found when an accounting was rendered of the tribes here beneath the cliffs of Telinchechitl. When the young hunters found the Blue Robes slain, they knew that Bisochim's warnings that the False Balance sought all our lives were truth, and so they struck first to save us all. What else could they have done, seeing those murdered who could not have died except at the hands of enemies of the True Balance?"

"There's only one Balance." Harrier really hadn't meant to say anything. He'd meant to use his common sense, stay quiet, and hope Shaiara and maybe Ciniran could figure out something to say that would get them out of here. But enough was enough. There were limits to common sense. "I don't care what you think. I don't care what Bisochim's told you, or why. There's only one Balance, and it isn't *false*, and it isn't *true*, it just *is*. And if the Wildmage that Zanattar found was murdered, then he was murdered by Bisochim, because Bisochim's the only one I know of who would use his power that way, and he's been killing my friends for over a year now and I'm really tired of it."

Harrier set down the cup, got to his feet, and threw back the hood of his cloak, unclasping it so it dropped to the carpet. He tightened the straps of his sword-harness so that the swords rose up into their proper position over his shoulders. As an afterthought, he dragged his *chadar* down away from his nose and mouth—in the dampness of the air here, it was just irritating anyway. "So—Noble'dy—if you'd be so kind as to take me to Bisochim now, I guess one or the other of us will finish the job."

"*Harrier!*" Tiercel said, aghast. Ciniran stared at him, her dark eyes wide in horror.

"Oh, come on, Tyr," Harrier said. "What did you think was going to happen now? We can't leave, and we can't hide."

"Don't listen to him," Tiercel said to Liapha, getting to his feet and flinging off his cloak as well. "I'm the one who was sent here. The Elves sent me here. The Light told me to come."

"Did it?" Liapha asked with interest.

"Shut up, Tiercel!" Harrier said furiously. "Don't you listen to him, Noble'dy—he's sun-touched. He follows me everywhere, and I can't get rid of him!"

"You—you're *lying!*" Tiercel said, horrified. "He's lying! Ciniran—Shaiara—tell her he's lying—"

"Fool of a northerner!" Ciniran spat, bounding up from her place on the carpet and glaring at Tiercel furiously. "Are you so eager to die?"

"Grandmother!" Rinurta came running out of the interior of the tent, a basket of bread and dates in her arms. At the sight of Harrier and Tiercel standing over Liapha she dropped it, scattering its contents everywhere, fell to her knees, and began to wail. At the sound of her howls, all the men and women inside the tent came rushing to the entrance. Several of the women knelt down and began asking Rinurta anxiously if she was all right, while the men began demanding who Harrier and Tiercel were and what they had done to her. Rinurta continued to wail.

"If you'd just let me—" Harrier began, raising his voice to be heard over the clamor.

"I was the one supposed to—" Tiercel shouted right back.

"Kadyastar *barghus!*" Ciniran spat in contempt.

"Who are you?" A young man had come running up the line of tents at the sound of shouting. He was mud-spattered, and one side of his face was scarred, the eyelid sewn shut over a missing eye. "Northerners!" he said, his hand going to his *geschak*.

Harrier stepped back, grabbing Tiercel by the arm and dragging him back beside him.

"Hadyan," Liapha said. "And Rinurta."

Though her voice was quiet, it managed to cut through the noise of the crowd. Hadyan lowered his hand from his knife and Rinurta's wailing stopped as abruptly as if she'd been gagged, though it did little to decrease the noise level. "But *Ummara*—do you not see what they are?" Hadyan demanded. "Explain yourselves at once!" he demanded again.

"They are under the protection of the Nalzindar!" Ciniran shouted at him. "They need not explain themselves to a Kadyastar!"

"The Nalzindar are fools!" Hadyan bellowed in return. "To spurn the truth when it was offered them—to run and hide like cowards and *pakh!*"

"Better to hide like the *sheshu* than slaughter innocent children like a pack of maddened *feneric!*" Ciniran spat hotly.

"Will you just stay out of this?" Harrier demanded, turning to her, but it was useless. He thought that the only reason Ciniran was alive right now was either because she was unarmed or because Liapha had served her *kaffeyah* before the shouting had started. The Telchi had managed to teach him as much about avoiding fights as about winning them, and here in the south there were a lot of rules about exactly when you could attack somebody. Over a meal was not one of those times.

People were arriving at Liapha's tent from everywhere now, men with *awardans* unsheathed in their hands, women carrying lances and bows. There was no hope now of staying hidden. If there was anyone in the entire camp who didn't know what was going on, they were either unconscious or a couple of miles away. All around him Harrier could hear versions of the story being passed, told and retold as the crowd gathered. Bisochim's name figured frequently in the tale. He drew a deep breath, forcing himself not to reach for his swords. From the corner of his eye he could see that Shaiara was still seated on the carpet at Liapha's side. The two of them were the only ones who were. He thought about what he'd heard before all the shouting had started—that Liapha was Shaiara's grandmother. Even if she was, it didn't seem to matter much. Just like the fact that he was a Knight-Mage didn't matter much. He actually wondered why Liapha hadn't ordered somebody to shoot them yet.

Why in the name of the Light hadn't he kept his mouth shut? Just because some sun-touched old grandmother was saying the same thing everybody here believed was no reason for him to argue with her and make speeches about the Wild Magic and the Balance. If convincing people were that easy, Zanattar would never have

destroyed Tarnatha'Iteru. Now they had no chance of getting to Bisochim. He could cut his way out of the crowd, Harrier knew that—just as he knew he wouldn't, for more reasons than he could count. He didn't think he could get Tiercel, Ciniran, and Shaiara free as well, and if he could, they had nowhere to run to. Finding Bisochim by himself—even if he could—didn't mean Harrier could *do* anything about him. That was Tiercel's job. It always had been.

The noise all around them had actually started to level off when Harrier saw the people at the back of the crowd stagger as they were jostled aside, and a man forced his way through the press of bodies. Among the dozens of anonymous Isvaieni surrounding them, that was one face Harrier knew and would not forget.

"Stand aside! I will protect you from these Demonspawn, *Ummara* Liapha!" Zanattar bawled furiously.

"Zanattar of the Lanzanur, son of Kataduk who is *Ummara*—as yet—of the Lanzanur—should I require protection, my own blood stands ready to aid me. Nor do I see Demons here," Liapha said mildly.

Now Liapha levered herself to her feet, leaning on Shaiara's shoulder for support. The ring of onlookers had gone absolutely silent as she spoke. Liapha looked sternly at Rinurta, who fled back into the depths of the tent and returned bearing a tall smooth staff, its wood polished with age. Liapha transferred her grip from Shaiara's shoulder to the staff.

"*Ummara*, these are *Demons*," Zanattar said again, now as confused as he was angry. "At Tarnatha'Iteru I faced them—they slew hundreds of my army—your own kin!"

Harrier opened his mouth to protest, but Tiercel gripped his arm tightly. He closed it again. Tiercel was right. Shooting his mouth off hadn't gotten them anywhere. The fact that he *did* want to kill Zanattar, and he'd never wanted to kill someone before, was something he had to keep under control. As abruptly as if someone had spoken in his ear, Harrier remembered the words of the *Book of Sun: Anger is the greatest tool of the Knight-Mage*. They hadn't made sense to him at the time, and they still didn't, but they held him still and silent.

Liapha nodded, as if she were giving Zanattar's words serious consideration. "And so you took them prisoner, fearing to kill them lest their Demons fly free. You meant to bring them to Bisochim, but a great black dragon came and freed them, so you have said. And many others have said the same, so you need not glower at me, son of Kataduk, as if I impugn your honor. And now, here they are, and they have asked to be brought to Bisochim themselves. I fail to see where in any of this lies an occasion for the drawing of steel."

"So the Nazindar have sheltered Demons—no wonder we sought them in vain!" Hadyan said contemptuously.

"Hadyan, you tempt me to try to live forever," Liapha said tartly. "My only consolation is that if there are to be no tribes, then there will be no *Ummarai* either. It will comfort me when I go to lay my bones upon the sand. For now, I shall bring these so-called Demons to Bisochim and we shall seek his counsel, for should their dragon seek to aid them, then surely his dragon will succor him in turn." She paused, regarding the group surrounding them—about fifty people now, Harrier judged. "There are not so many handspans of light remaining to us to gather up our herds and set our camp to rights. Or do my eyes mistake me, and is all accomplished? Or perhaps it is merely that the Isvaieni have grown so wealthy since this day's dawn that we can afford the loss of more beasts than would be slaughtered did we feast in celebration for an entire moonturn?"

But if some of those present were shamed into slinking off, Zanattar was not. "You were not at Tarnatha'Iteru, *Ummara* Liapha," he said steadily. "You did not see what destruction these creatures wrought there." He glared at Harrier.

"Not as much as you did," Harrier answered, glaring back.

"Then that is well," Zanattar said, smiling coldly. "A good beginning."

Five



The Stronghold of Illusion

ENOUGH!” SHAIARA SAID sharply. “I shall not insult the tents of the Lanzanur by answering you as your words deserve. But if we are to seek Bisochim, it will be now.”

She moved between Harrier and Zanattar, and simply began to walk forward as if Zanattar weren't there at all. To Tiercel's surprise, Zanattar stepped back, and the crowd reformed around them as they began to move.

Shaiara, Liapha, and Zanattar were ahead of him, and Ciniran and Harrier were beside him. The rest of the Isvaieni who had not gone about the vital tasks of restoring the camp followed them, and Tiercel did his best not to feel as if the four of them had been taken prisoner, but it was difficult when that was obviously the way most of the people with them were thinking of them: as prisoners. He wished now he still had his cloak—it would have been too hot, but it would have given him more protection from the sun than just his *chadar* did. Even after so long in the Madiran and the Barahileth, it was hard for Tiercel to believe that in only a few more hours the temperature would drop to freezing.

It was hard for him to tell whether things were going right or horribly wrong just now. Right (he guessed) if they were going to get to see Bisochim. Not all that right if they were going to be escorted there by a mob of Isvaieni who thought they were Demons. And *really* wrong if Harrier lost his temper and tried to kill Zanattar. Tiercel thought they had bigger things to worry about right now, though. “*Should their dragon seek to aid them, then surely his dragon will succor him in turn.*” He wasn't sure if Harrier had heard Liapha's words and was just ignoring them, or had missed them because he was obsessing on Zanattar. If Bisochim was Bonded to a dragon . . .

Tiercel knew a Dragonbond didn't mean that Bisochim couldn't have fallen to the Dark, because so many Mages and their dragons had done just that more than two thousand years ago. No one in Armethalieh particularly remembered the Second Endarkened War. It was barely a footnote to the Flowering War: “*And then, once again, did the Endarkened rise up from the Shadow to strike at the Light.*” But “once again” had lasted over a hundred years, and the greatest casualty of that war had been the dragons—and the Wildmages Bonded to them. Over and over, the Dark had used its power to seduce and Taint Dragonbond Mages, promising them—so the Elves had written—immortality for themselves and thus for their dragons if they renounced the Light. Maybe the Endarkened would even have made good on their promises. No one knew. None of the Dark-corrupted Dragonbonds had survived more than a few years.

Tiercel didn't want to think about Ancaladar, especially now. If Harrier hadn't lied to him—if the Bond was still intact—when he died here, he'd be killing Ancaladar. Knowing this had always been what was going to happen—knowing that if Ancaladar had stayed with Jermayan he'd already be dead—didn't make Tiercel feel any better. And if Bisochim *did* have a dragon, they'd be killing it if they managed to kill Bisochim.

He almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of the thought. There really wasn't a single thing he—or any of them—could do except explain to Bisochim that what he was doing was *wrong*. And since the Dark was already free, that would be pointless, so why worry about whether he was going to succeed or fail? He already knew the answer. Unless . . . He stopped walking so suddenly that Ciniran bumped into him from behind. She shoved him—hard—and he stumbled forward. Harrier reached out a hand to steady him, shooting him a questioning look.

“Bisochim has a dragon,” Tiercel said in a low urgent voice.

“I know he has a dragon, Tyr,” Harrier said irritably. “Noble'dy Liapha said so.”

“No, no, no—don't you see, Har?” Tiercel said, his words tripping over each other in his excitement. “That's the key—that's the *answer!* All I have to do is convince him to go to the Veiled Lands—he can do that if he has a dragon—he can go to the Elves—they'll explain to him—” *That he's been wrong. Then he'll tell them what he did, and they'll do something to fix it, and he'll come back and explain to the Isvaieni that he was wrong about the Balance, and—*

“Yeah. You can tell him yourself in about a chime,” Harrier said brusquely, cutting him off.

Tiercel clamped his teeth shut, forcing himself to stop talking. Harrier never wanted to hear anything he had to say, even when it was something that was important and might be about to save all of their lives. Tiercel didn't say that either. It would do no one any good—not him to say, nor Harrier to hear.



IT actually took them a bit more than two chimes—half an hour—to make their way through all the tents, across an enormous meadow, and to reach the place where Bisochim was, since Liapha moved slowly and apparently nobody was going to suggest that she go back to her tent. Nobody was willing to speak to him or Harrier, but Liapha seemed to take a malicious delight both in answering the questions of the people they passed (in great detail) and in talking to Shaiara about anything that happened to cross her mind, so Tiercel heard that in the middle of the day everyone had suddenly found themselves standing beneath the Cliffs of Telinchechitl as water fell from the sky, and that now the Cliffs of Telinchechitl had been erased entirely.

“It was the work of Demons,” Zanattar growled. Tiercel wasn't sure whether Zanattar meant the rain, or the disappearance of the cliffs, but several of the others in the crowd muttered agreement.

“I am certain that it was, Zanattar,” Liapha said placidly. “And I am as familiar with *The Book of the Light* as you are. I doubt, therefore, that if these children were Demons you would have been able to capture them once, nor that they would have been trapped twice. But Bisochim will know.”

“Yet will he speak truth?” Shaiara asked bitterly. Liapha simply pretended not to hear the question.

Once they got out of the encampment itself, the crowd shifted to encircle them completely. Tiercel didn't know how many people it contained by now—it had picked up more than it had held when they'd left Liapha's tent, he thought. He might not be as *paranoid* as Harrier, but it was clear that most of the people surrounding them saw the two of them—possibly even the four of them—as the enemy. That made him nervous, because he couldn't really see anything but the backs of the people ahead of him. All he was completely sure of was that they were walking over grass.

Finally everyone slowed, then stopped. Liapha poked at the people ahead of her with the end of her staff until they moved aside. When they did, Tiercel could see

enormous piles of sand and drifting wisps of steam. They were at the—former—cliffs. Through the steam, beyond the sand, he could see sunlight sparkling on water—a lot of water—stretching off into the distance. He'd come in search of a Lake of Fire, and all that was here was . . . a lake.

Oddly, there were pieces of furniture in the sand, either broken or half-buried, and dishes, and jars, and rugs, and Tiercel swallowed hard as he realized that the wreckage reminded him of what had been left of Tarnatha'Iteru after he'd turned everything stone in the city into water.

A man got to his feet. He'd been sitting in the midst of the wreckage, so still that Tiercel hadn't seen him until he moved. He walked slowly toward them.

This had to be Bisochim.

Tiercel wasn't sure what he'd expected Bisochim to look like. It was difficult to tell his age—older than Zanattar, Tiercel guessed, younger than Liapha. Bisochim looked like any other Isvaieni, and even though everyone—even Shaiara—had called him a Wildmage, he wasn't wearing blue robes. His open vest was gray with a darker stripe, his overtunic had probably started out white, and his sash was missing. But he looked utterly ordinary.

"Bisochim, these are the Demons I told you of!" Zanattar announced loudly. "They have come to seek your life!"

Tiercel heard Harrier growl in frustration. At Zanattar's words, the half-circle of spectators opened out even more, leaving the four of them, Zanattar, and Liapha in the center of a large open space.

"And I say this is not so!" Shaiara spoke up loudly, stepping away from Liapha and Zanattar and turning to face the crowd. "I am Shaiara, *Ummara* of the Nalzindar, and these two have been guests in my tents for two turns of the moon. If you slay my guests you must slay me and bring such shame to the tents of your kin as will be spoken of between Sand and Star for as long as either endures. I say this also: it is in my ears that you made war against the *Iteru-cities* with the thought that they had slain the Blue Robes. Will you slay one of the Blue Robes in turn? Harrier of the Two Swords holds the Three Books. Kill him and his companion, and become the evil you fear." Her voice was harsh with contempt.

An excited hissing ran through the crowd as the Isvaieni whispered to each other. Liapha turned and stared hard at him and Harrier, but Tiercel wasn't sure of how to interpret her expression. Liapha walked slowly to the edge of the crowd, to where Hadyan and Rinurta stood, and placed herself between them.

"I thank you for bringing them to me." Bisochim spoke for the first time. Tiercel wasn't sure what he'd been expecting—the hissing of Demons? The cracked voice of someone utterly inhuman? In his dream visions, he'd never heard the voice of the man to whom the Fire Woman spoke. Bisochim's voice was hoarse, and he sounded tired, but he sounded just like anyone else. "But this is business best left to Wildmages, and I would hear their words alone."

The Isvaieni muttered uneasily, but the close-packed density of the crowd began to diminish as the people moved away from each other, preparing to depart. A few people actually walked away, but not many.

"No!" Zanattar's protest was quick and harsh. "Your pardon, Bisochim, but I have seen what these creatures can do. Already they have struck at us here in our place of safety—I will not leave you alone so that they may slay you and strip us of all shield against their evil magic."

"Evil magic." Bisochim didn't just sound tired now, he sounded utterly spent. Tiercel glanced at Harrier. Harrier's face was set in hard lines of determination, and Tiercel didn't dare take the risk of trying to talk to him now. There were too many people still here who could misinterpret anything he might say.

"The only evil magic here is that of the Shadow-Touched, who has led you upon the path of folly, Zanattar," Shaiara said coldly.

"Shadow-Touched indeed, Shaiara—but it is the Nalzindar and their *Ummara* who are Shadow-Touched, to offer their protection to Demons," Zanattar answered brutally. "And so I say again—what is to be done here must be done in the sight of all, so that we may see that the Demons are truly slain." Zanattar put one hand on the hilt of his sword and one hand on the haft of his knife and stared from Shaiara to Bisochim.

"You *dare*—" Shaiara began.

"I say they are not Demonspawn." Bisochim took several quick steps forward, his face drawn in an expression that might be anger and might be grief. "And I say—again—I will hear their words alone." Zanattar stepped back in surprise, his hands tightening on the hilts of his weapons, even though Bisochim was still several yards away.

It won't work. Tiercel could already tell. Bisochim was supposed to be the powerful Dark-tainted Wildmage who was bringing the Dark back into the world, who'd sent the Isvaieni to destroy the String of Pearls. And the Isvaieni weren't going to obey him. The crowd had stopped moving away when Zanattar had spoken, and now nobody was moving anywhere at all. In another moment, Zanattar would reach for his sword, and then Harrier would draw *his* swords, and then Bisochim would do . . . *something*, and it would all go wrong. Even speaking out to try to stop it could tip the balance in the wrong direction. There was utter silence.

"Come, Zanattar, lend me your strength. It is a long walk back to my tent and the shadows lengthen," Liapha said brightly.

Tiercel began to count slowly and silently, holding his breath. He'd reached "ten" before Zanattar took the first reluctant step toward Liapha. When he arrived at her side, she reached up to grip his shoulder with her free hand and began to chatter amiably about roasting a goat, or even several goats, or perhaps even one of the Kareggi's great bullocks if Zanattar could make Fannas see that the foolish beasts were better eaten than coddled. Once Zanattar began to walk with Liapha, the rest of the Isvaieni turned and slowly followed.

Tiercel let out his breath in a long sigh. Beside him, Harrier was still tense and quivering. "Harrier—" he began.

"Don't," Harrier said tightly. He took a step forward, reaching up to draw his swords, but Bisochim had turned his back and was walking away as if none of them existed.

Harrier let his hands drop and followed him. Even though he wasn't actually holding his swords, he was pacing after Bisochim like a cat stalking a bird, and although Harrier didn't look as if he was moving that fast, Tiercel had to hurry to keep up. The only reason he didn't grab Harrier to stop him was because he had no particular desire to get knocked sprawling.

Bisochim walked back to the place Tiercel had first seen him and sat down again. Harrier loomed over him. Tiercel reached Harrier's side a moment later, sure that *now* he was going to have to do . . . something.

But Harrier was just standing there.

"We really did come here to kill you, you know," Harrier said. He didn't sound angry now. He just sounded really irritated.

"*Har!*" Tiercel said.

"He tried to kill us!" Harrier said defensively.

"I deserve death," Bisochim answered.

"We're too late," Tiercel said.

He'd known it, out in the storm, but he hadn't wanted to admit it—to himself or to the others. They'd all just kept going. Because of Harrier's MagePrice. Because there was nothing else to do. Because the fact that they'd failed (he'd failed) was too *enormous* to think about.

Harrier looked at Tiercel, looking as irritated as a wet cat. "Isn't he supposed to be Tainted now? He isn't Tainted."

"How can the Shadowed One not be Tainted?" Shaiara demanded, approaching the three of them warily. "He who has led the tribes into madness, who has twisted their minds with the Wild Magic, who has led them to slaughter the people of the *Iteru-cities* like the *sheshu* in their burrows."

"Well, he isn't!" Harrier snapped in exasperation. "And unfortunately, I'd know."

"If you will not kill him, then I will," Shaiara said grimly. She reached out to draw one of Harrier's swords.

"Oh, no, wait," Tiercel said, grabbing for Shaiara at the same moment Harrier stepped sideways out of her reach. Shaiara elbowed him painfully in the ribs and Tiercel staggered back. "He's—You—" Tiercel stopped. He had no idea what to say. *Why did you call up a Demon? Are you immortal now? Why aren't you Tainted? Do you have a dragon?* Every question he could think of to ask Bisochim seemed unbearably stupid.

Harrier walked a few steps away, sat down on a chest, and pulled off his *chadar*. He scrubbed his face and neck with it, shook it out, and then carefully wrapped it back into place again. Then he just sat there, hands dangling between his knees. Tiercel stared at him until he saw a flash of light out of the corner of his eye. Shaiara and Ciniran were digging through the litter of things in the sand, and Shaiara had found a knife. She got to her feet.

"You led the Isvaieni to slaughter," she said to Bisochim. "You made them your tool to kill thousands more. You meant my people to do the same." She took a long step forward. "Yet in the name of what you once were, I shall grant that which you ask."

"Shaiara, don't," Tiercel said. "We need him." He was staring at Bisochim, unwilling to look away.

Harrier laughed raggedly. "For what, Tyr? To do whatever he did again?"

"To tell us what he did so we can try to fix it," Tiercel answered steadily.

"I put Darkness into flesh. For love," Bisochim said in a low voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tiercel saw Shaiara stop moving. She and Ciniran stood as if they'd been spell-struck, and didn't move again. If either Shaiara or Harrier had moved or spoken, Tiercel thought Bisochim might have stopped talking, but he could almost feel the unnatural stillness on either side of him. He didn't dare look away from the man sitting at his feet.

"Tell me what you did," Tiercel said quietly.

Afternoon became twilight as Bisochim spoke, his voice barely louder than a whisper. He spoke of Saravasse, his Bonded, of the shortness of her years once they had been linked to his, of his conviction from the moment he first took up the Three Books that there was some riddle the Wild Magic meant for him to unfold, of withdrawing from the world, coming to this ancient place of power, setting his feet upon the path that led to his conviction of an imbalance in the Wild Magic. He spoke of years of careful exploration that had led him to the conclusion that Darkness must be reborn, of his careful plans and safeguards to ensure that the tiny spark of Darkness he summoned into the world would be harmlessly entombed, of having those plans spiral farther and farther out of control. . . .

"They used you and they lied to you," Tiercel said quietly.

"Yes," Bisochim answered simply. "I have set Ahairan free to do as she will. I have saved no one. I have gained nothing."

"And we've lost," Harrier said, speaking for the first time. But there was a note of uncertainty in his voice.

"No," Tiercel answered. For the first time since he'd lost Ancaladar—a wound that would never heal—Tiercel felt the tiniest spark of hope. He didn't know what would *work*, but for the first time in sennights, he could think of things to *do*. "I don't think . . . Not yet. All right. Yes. This doesn't match my vision. My vision was warning me not to let the woman in the Lake of Fire get what it was she wanted, and I guess she's already got that, but there's only one of her, and individual Endarkened have a lot of power, but they can be trapped, just the way Bisochim was planning to."

"That isn't really a good solution," Harrier said, after a moment. He got to his feet and came to stand beside Tiercel, moving carefully through the drifts of soft wet sand. Though it was nearly full dark now, neither Tiercel nor Harrier had conjured up a globe of light.

But this is the answer, it has to be, Tiercel thought with rising excitement. If he'd been born with the MageGift, others would be too. "It doesn't have to be," Tiercel said. "Not a permanent solution. Just a temporary one. A High Mage and a Wildmage working together can kill a Demon. We just need to imprison Ahairan until a new High Mage can be born—found—and trained—and—"

"I cannot," Bisochim said starkly. "Have you not paid heed to the tale I have told? Were I able to trap the creature, she would already be at my mercy."

"All right then," Harrier said briskly, into the echoing silence that followed Bisochim's words. "If you can't do it, somebody else has to. The Elves have lots of dragons. You have to go and tell them to come here. That's what you said," he added, nodding to Tiercel.

"Send the Tainted One to the Veiled Lands?" Ciniran spoke for the first time since they'd arrived here at the lakeside. She sounded appalled.

"There are Dragonbond Elven Mages in the Veiled Lands, and Bisochim has a dragon," Harrier said, logically. "His dragon can fly through Pelashia's Veil, and . . . I guess Tiercel's going to have to go with him."

"What? Me?" Tiercel said. He couldn't believe Harrier was making this suggestion in the first place—and from his tone of voice, neither could Harrier. Tiercel didn't want to go back to the Elven Lands and explain to Idalia that he'd failed. He didn't want to look down at the earth below from the back of someone else's dragon, either. He couldn't believe that Harrier thought this was a good idea. Maybe Harrier just thought it was the *only* idea.

"Unless you think Vairindiel Elvenqueen and whoever's at House Malkirinath now is going to take Bisochim's word for it, yes, Tyr, you." Harrier held out his hand, and a small globe of blue fire began to grow on his palm. "And bearing in mind that I'm not sure the Elves didn't know exactly who you were looking for and where he was before you left Karahelanderialigor. But if you go, and explain, they should be willing to help, and enough of them, working together, should be able to find and imprison this Ahairan." The globe of blue fire left Harrier's palm and began to rise upward, continuing to grow. Harrier began to make a second one. "I'm going to go see if that lake's safe to drink." Harrier turned and walked off, just as casually as if he weren't walking away from the Wildmage he and Tiercel had been chasing for over a year. One of the globes of Coldfire followed him, the other remained where it was, casting stark blue shadows on Bisochim's face. In the darkness, the Coldfire's azure radiance turned everything to shades of gray.

Tiercel glanced over his shoulder toward the Isvaieni encampment, only now—belatedly—remembering that there were thousands of people only a couple of miles away who thought that he and Harrier were Demons and wanted them dead. But apparently they weren't willing to come back to the cliffs—where the cliffs had *been*—after Bisochim had sent them away. Tiercel saw the faint lights of lanterns, the larger brighter lights of cookfires, spread out over hectares of desert, but in the space between, he saw no moving figures.

When he looked back in Bisochim's direction again, Tiercel saw that Shaiara and Ciniran had gotten to their feet without a single word spoken and followed Harrier. When the three of them had walked around the edge of the dune, Tiercel and Bisochim were alone. Tiercel realized the others had planned it that way, expecting him to convince Bisochim to summon Saravasse and fly to the Elven Lands right now.

Because you're the Anointed Champion of the Light, Tiercel thought bitterly. *Everyone's been saying so for moonturns. Probably even for years.* For a moment Tiercel wondered why Harrier hadn't stayed to at least *try* to protect him—and then he realized what Harrier already knew. If Bisochim wanted him dead—wanted *any* of them dead—there was nothing any of them could do to stop him.

"I . . ." He started to say something—something that would make Bisochim do what they wanted—but the words changed themselves without his conscious thought. "I'm sorry she's going to die," he said instead.

Bisochim raised his head to look at Tiercel. "You cannot understand," he said bleakly.

"I—" The words dried up in Tiercel's throat, choking him, and it was a long moment before he could speak. "His name was Ancaladar," Tiercel whispered. "I don't know why I'm still alive."

"You are the Dragonbond Mage," Bisochim said in disbelief.

"I was," Tiercel answered. Bisochim must have known that one of the two of them was a Dragonbond Mage, but he must have assumed it was *Harrier*. He would have sensed Harrier's Wildmagery, but Harrier had never been able to sense Tiercel's MageGift, so Bisochim wouldn't have either.

"How can you yet live?" Bisochim asked simply.

"I don't know," Tiercel said, swallowing hard. "Everybody—Harrier—says he—Ancaladar—isn't dead. Even after he . . . went away, I . . . I knew I had to come here to—To stop you. For almost a year I—I had visions. Of the—Of Ahairan. You have to help us. You have to take Saravasse and fly to the Elven Lands."

"No," Bisochim said bleakly, turning his face away. "You do not understand. She . . . my Bonded, my beloved, she begged me to give up my madness. But all I could see was the death to which my love had doomed her. How can I call her to my side, gaze into her eyes, and allow her to see what my pride and folly have done? Never. Never will I summon Saravasse to me again. *Never*." He got to his feet and began to walk away.

"No, but—*Wait!* You—" Tiercel grabbed for Bisochim's sleeve, but his fingers closed over empty air. Suddenly Bisochim simply wasn't there.

Tiercel spun wildly in a circle. *A spell. It has to be.* Knowing that wasn't much comfort. Tiercel knew all the spells of invisibility and distraction that Ancaladar had taught him. True invisibility was a spell nearly impossible to achieve—there were too many small traces that might reveal one's presence—the way the light fell, footprints on the ground, the shift of the air, sounds. But everywhere Tiercel looked—in the grass, in the spilled sand—there was nothing. He even ran in the direction he thought Bisochim might have gone—arms flailing wildly—and touched nothing. Even calling up his own globe of MageLight to illuminate the grass was useless. After a few minutes, he gave up, shaking his head in frustration. If Bisochim was determined not to call Saravasse, there weren't that many places he could go. He wouldn't just walk out into the desert, because he'd die, and if he died, Saravasse would die too. But that didn't mean Tiercel would be able to find him. Bisochim could just walk down into the encampment and be welcome in any tent, the way Shaiara and Ciniran said the Blue Robes always were. If any of the four of *them* tried it, though, they'd probably get their throats cut.

But regardless of where Bisochim might be right now, he wasn't somewhere Tiercel could talk to him, so he supposed he should go and tell the others that he'd failed. Spectacularly. He turned and retraced his steps in the direction the others had gone, his globe of MageLight hovering above him to light his way. When he got around the end of the dune, he saw Harrier a few hundred yards further away, kneeling by the edge of the lake.

The lake water looked black in the darkness, even though Harrier had his ball of Coldfire hovering above him. The lake's surface was gently steaming, but if it had been the source of all the steam from earlier today, it had cooled a lot since then. By the light of Harrier's Coldfire, Tiercel could see that there were a few things floating on the surface of the lake—wooden boxes, and bowls, and some things he couldn't identify. Glancing back over his shoulder, Tiercel could see that the lake-side of the dunes spilled directly down into the lake.

"The sand's still wet," Harrier said, when Tiercel reached him. "When it dries, it will probably all slide into the lake. Or blow away. I wonder where it came from?"

"What?" Tiercel asked blankly. He couldn't imagine why Harrier even cared about something like that right now.

"The sand," Harrier said, not looking up. "This is *regh*-desert. *You* know: no sand for a moonturn's ride or more. So where'd it come from? Also, I walked a little way around it. The lake is round. And hot." Harrier cupped water in his hand and flicked it at Tiercel. The water wasn't actually hot, but it was warm. "I bet it was boiling earlier," he added.

Tiercel didn't say anything.

"When is Saravasse getting here?" Harrier asked. When Tiercel still didn't say anything, Harrier looked up. The ball of Coldfire right above him cast his face into sharp contrasts. His skin looked white, the fortnight's growth of beard black. His *chadar* was pulled forward as it had been earlier in the day. His eyes were in shadow. He stared upward until Tiercel was forced to answer.

"He said he wouldn't call her. He said he wouldn't ever call her again. Then he cast some kind of spell and vanished," Tiercel said brusquely.

Harrier sighed and stared back down at the water. "I wonder where the cliffs went and why all this sand is here," he said musingly.

"Where are Shaiara and Ciniran?" Tiercel asked. He wanted to ask if Harrier was all right, but he didn't quite dare.

"Scavenging," Harrier said. He gestured vaguely, back in the direction Tiercel had come from.

Tiercel knelt down beside him. There was grass all the way to the water's edge: grass and mud, and the familiar smells of home. He dug the fingers of one hand into the topsoil as he began scooping water into his mouth with the other. The water was tepid and tasted faintly of stone, but if Harrier had been drinking it, it wasn't likely to poison anyone. When he'd finished drinking Tiercel dipped both hands into the lake, rinsed his hands clean, and then washed his face.

"Do you think it would have made a difference if we'd come straight here as soon as we could? Not waited?" he asked hesitantly. *Ancaladar would be alive if I hadn't insisted on exploring all of Abi'Abadshar.* He refused to say it aloud. He didn't think he could stand to hear Harrier reassure him that Ancaladar *had* to be alive when all of Tiercel's instincts told him that he wasn't.

It was a long moment before Harrier answered. "I think it would have made a difference," he said at last. "I think we'd be dead now. And so would a lot of other people. And nothing else much would have changed."

Tiercel recoiled in shock. He didn't know what he'd expected Harrier to say, but not that. "But—But—" he stammered.

"But Bisochim has a dragon too," Harrier said flatly, turning Tiercel's half-made protest into something else entirely. "Saravasse. He's had her for years. He's been a Dragonbond Mage for years, not just for a few moonturns. Weren't you listening? He made this place just to have somewhere to work, a long time before he decided to call up a Demon. He'd never have believed he was wrong about doing that until Ahairan told him flat out that the Dark had been lying to him all along. So . . . say we got here—with Ancaladar—before Ahairan was out. Would you have killed Bisochim knowing you'd kill Saravasse too?"

"I . . ." The words Tiercel wanted to say died in his throat. He wanted to think he would have. He knew he wouldn't have been able to.

"So he'd kill us. And then he'd set Ahairan free. But say that didn't happen. Say you killed him, and Saravasse, and we flew away. Those puzzle-boxes you told me about—remember? What if they were almost open already? What if somebody else came along and finished opening them?"

"Stop saying *if!*" Tiercel said angrily.

"You started it," Harrier said. He didn't even sound angry. He just sounded tired.

"You make it sound like—Like Ancaladar being gone is the best thing that could have happened," Tiercel said furiously. "It isn't! It isn't." He swallowed hard and scrubbed at his eyes. The anger was like a stone in his throat, and Tiercel thought he'd choke on it. He couldn't either swallow it down or cough it up.

"I never said that, Tyr. You know I didn't," Harrier said softly.

"You lied to me. Tell me the truth," Tiercel said, and his voice was hard and ugly.

"Lied?" Harrier's sudden astonishment was genuine. "Tyr, as—as the Eternal Light is my witness, I've never lied to you. I swear it."

"Do Wildmages swear by the Eternal Light?" Tiercel asked, after a moment. He wanted to believe Harrier more than he'd ever wanted anything, but something held him back.

"I don't know," Harrier said. "I guess so. I do. The Eternal Light is part of the Wild Magic, so it's got to be okay."

"If it wasn't, would you know?" Tiercel asked.

“Yeah. I think. I guess. I get a kind of headache-thing when I’m trying not to pay a MagePrice when it’s time. I guess it would be something like that. Why are we talking about this?” Harrier just sounded confused now.

“Because you’re sitting here making Coldfire,” Tiercel said viciously, “and back in Abi’Abadshar, you told me the MagePrice for Summoning Kareta was to destroy your Three Books and give up being a Wildmage after we’d defeated Bisochim.”

“Oh. That.” Harrier looked away. “He doesn’t exactly look defeated.” He got to his feet. “Look—”

“You didn’t Summon Kareta at all, did you?” Tiercel said.

“Tiercel Isallen Rolfört, if you ever again say to me that I would lie to you about a spell I cast, or about Ancaladar, you won’t have to worry about the Dark killing you,” Harrier said. “But you’re right: I didn’t Summon Kareta. I Called her. She came. She told me exactly what I told you she did. There was MagePrice involved. Bisochim’s name wasn’t mentioned, but MagePrices aren’t always set in words. I got to choose what I’d pay.”

Tiercel had never heard Harrier’s voice so angry and so quiet at the same time. He knew he was hearing both honesty and truth—he could count the times Harrier had used his middle name on the fingers of one hand—and the sense of mixed relief and shame he felt was enough to make him lightheaded. He had no idea of how to begin to make this right between them. “What was the thing you didn’t pick?” he finally asked.

“To leave with her right then,” Harrier said. “Come on. It’s cold here.”

They walked back to the other side of the dune. Shaiara and Ciniran had dug a number of items free of the sand—jugs, cups, bowls, pitchers. They’d opened the chest that Harrier had been sitting on and draped its contents—cloth, probably clothing—over the sides. Now they were dragging a carpet free of the sand. Harrier joined them and began helping them haul the carpet free.



HARRIER had done a Finding Spell to try to locate Bisochim. It hadn’t worked, but afterward Harrier had gone off—alone—to the pile of sand and dug, bare-handed, for almost an hour. When he came back, he was shivering with cold and his hands were bleeding, but he’d found them food—hard cheese and dried fruit. Tiercel wasn’t sure whether Harrier had been paying MagePrice for the spell he’d cast, and he didn’t want to ask.

While Harrier was gone, Shaiara and Ciniran had scoured the desert for tracks, for any sign at all of Bisochim, starting from the place where he’d been sitting. They’d done it once in the dark, and a second time with globes of MageLight that Tiercel made for them. They found no sign of any fresh tracks but his, theirs, and Harrier’s. Whatever spell Bisochim had used, it had made him disappear more thoroughly than anything Tiercel could imagine. When Harrier returned, they gave up their search. What they would have done—*could* have done—if they’d found him, Tiercel wasn’t sure.

“Are we really sure we want to stay here for the night?” Harrier asked, dropping his finds onto the scavenged rug. It looked very odd sitting out here in the middle of nowhere, without even a tent near it.

“I will not seek *charity* from the tents of the Kadyastar,” Shaiara said, her chin held high. “Let others do as they will.”

Harrier snorted wordlessly. “At least if somebody takes it into their head to come ‘Demon-hunting’ after a long day of goat-herding, we’ll have a hope of seeing them before they get here,” he said after a moment.

“I think they will not, Harrier,” Ciniran said, after a moment’s thought. “Bisochim said to them that this was a matter for Wildmages, and that he wished to be left to deal with it alone. I think that not even Zanattar will slink back during the hours of night, for neither Kataduk nor Harbatta will wish to bear the shame of it.”

Tiercel heard Harrier sigh. “Yeah. I hope you’re right. Okay. If we’re sleeping here, let’s get to work.”



AFTER a couple of hours, the four of them had scavenged a surprisingly comfortable place to spend the night. The best of all their finds—better than the enormous brazier and the sacks of charcoal, even better than the food—was the chest of clothing. Though Shaiara made disdainful faces at the garments—for all of them were dyed and patterned, and the Nalzindar wore only undyed fabrics—at last they were all fully—and warmly—dressed.

Tiercel’s outfit was the gaudiest—a green-and-white striped vest, with a matching sash and *chadar*, and a tunic in the same green as the stripes. The chest contained enough garments that they were all able to pick and choose: Shaiara and Ciniran had chosen solid colors, and Harrier had just grabbed the first things that fit; while he *had* clothes, they were crusted in mud, and his skin itched.

“*You should dress yourself suitably,*” Shaiara had said when they’d first opened the chest. *She’d held out a tunic and robe to Harrier. Though hue was difficult to tell by the cerulean light of Coldfire, it was obvious that both garments were a bright deep blue. The tunic might be a little short on Harrier, but both items would fit him. Isvaieni garments were voluminously cut.*

“*As a Wildmage?*” Harrier had said, recoiling slightly. “*Um, Shaiara, with all due respect, I don’t think that’s a really good idea.*”

“*The people respect the Blue Robes,*” Ciniran had said, as if pointing out that water was wet or fire was hot, and Harrier had laughed.

“*Yeah. Unfortunately they think I’m a Demon, so it wouldn’t really matter,*” Harrier replied, dropping the garments back into the chest.

Now the four of them sat around the brazier and ate handfuls of dried fruit and passed around a tankard they’d found—silver, and of northern manufacture—refilling it when it was empty from the large metal jug Ciniran had filled at the lake. It was odd, Tiercel thought, that the water should actually be cooler now than when they’d first taken it out of the lake. The brazier radiated welcome warmth. There was enough charcoal to keep them warm all night, and the circle of piled chests and scavenged furniture would help trap the heat. Tiercel leaned back against a chest and gazed up at the stars.

“So . . . nobody’s actually trying to kill us right now,” Harrier said, picking up one of the balls of cheese and starting to peel it with the *geschak* he’d found in the sand. He tossed each triangle of wax into the brazier as he pared it away. It made a bright flash and sizzle as it struck the coals and burned. “That’s good.”

He wouldn’t look at Tiercel. Tiercel didn’t know if Harrier was still angry with him, or if *he* was supposed to be angry with Harrier. He didn’t know what he ought to feel. He could barely comprehend that Harrier could sit here in the middle of their artificial wreckage and talk calmly and almost cheerfully as if they hadn’t already lost.

If there’d ever been a time that Tiercel had been tempted to hate his childhood friend, it was now. He was exhausted and angry and grief-stricken and *tired*. He was afraid to give up, but he didn’t see a way to go on. He just didn’t think a stubborn refusal to face reality was the way to do it. What if Harrier missed something important because he was refusing to *see*? What if Tiercel missed something equally important because he thought there wasn’t anything *to see*?

“—Demon out there somewhere and we’re in the middle of a bunch of Isvaieni who probably want to kill us,” Harrier was saying. “So. Tyr and this Wildmage and his dragon can deal with the Demon—once they get the Elves to help—and I guess Shaiara and Noble’dy Liapha can get the Isvaieni to back down in the morning. But those aren’t our only problems.”

Tiercel said: “They aren’t?” at the same time Shaiara said: “You will explain.” Ciniran merely sat forward and looked troubled, but the Nalzindar weren’t a people to waste words; if Shaiara had spoken Ciniran’s thoughts, Ciniran would feel no need to repeat them simply to hear the sound of her own voice.

Harrier divided the ball of cheese into four parts and passed the pieces around the fire. Tiercel knew there was no point in trying to hurry Harrier into explaining something before he was ready, and apparently Shaiara had reached the same conclusion, because she said nothing further. Tiercel glanced toward Ciniran. She looked

grave but composed, and he knew she wouldn't speak to urge Harrier to explain either.

"Refugees from both Laganda'Iteru and Tamatha'Iteru left for Akazidas'Iteru about a moonturn before Zanattar's army arrived, and I know at least some of them were planning to keep going north to Armethalieh," Harrier said. "The Consul probably sent word north by Dispatch Rider anyway. No matter how, they got word in Armethalieh that there's a marauding army sacking and burning the Trade Cities. If First Magistrate Vaunnel hasn't sent a delegation south to check the report . . . well, I'll be surprised."

Tiercel groaned, leaning forward and resting his head on his knees. "Tamatha'Iteru," he said.

"Right," Harrier answered with a sigh. "And then she'll actually do what Bisochim was telling the Isvaieni she was going to do in the first place. She'll assume the Isvaieni have declared war. And as soon as her troops get here, I'm betting Ahairan will attack them. Attack them, turn them into sheep—or just turn them around and march them on Armethalieh with herself at their head."

"This must not be," Ciniran declared. She regarded Harrier determinedly.

"It's already late spring—if not summer—so we can't expect the army before winter. That's the only good thing," Harrier said.

"And you think Ahairan will stay here and just wait for the army to show up?" Tiercel blurted out.

"I don't know," Harrier answered, his light mood turning sober. "I hope so. I'm sorry, Ciniran, Shaiara," he added.

"Not even to save my own kin would I see all the world become as the Barahileth," Shaiara said.

"We need to get Tiercel to the Veiled Lands to talk to Vairindiel Elvenqueen. We need their Elven Mages to find and trap Ahairan. Then we need to get back to Armethalieh and . . . explain things to the Chief Magistrate," Harrier said.

Tiercel fought the urge to say that making a list of problems wasn't the same as solving them. Saying that wouldn't make anything better. He knew that Harrier was just as tired as he was. Just as frightened. Making lists was Harrier's way of making problems look smaller. Tiercel only wished he could think of something that would make *his* problems look small and simple.

"So many great tasks," Ciniran said, sighing. She bit off a piece of the cheese in her hand and chewed as if even the thought of eating made her weary.

"We'll manage," Harrier said encouragingly, and suddenly Tiercel couldn't take *one more minute* of Harrier being calm and cheerful and refusing to admit that they'd *lost*, they'd *failed*.

But none of that was really true, was it? They might all *be* lost, but he was the only one who'd *failed*. Because he was the only one who'd been given this task. Tiercel Isallen Rolfört, age seventeen, son of Barover, Lord Rolfört, and Anointed Champion of the Light. *He* was the one who'd failed.

He pushed himself to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Harrier asked.

"For a walk," Tiercel snapped.



THIS was freedom. This was the World of Form—the world of things—the world that she and her progeny would make into their nest and their spawning ground, growing in power and grace until she and they could open a gateway to allow the hungry shadows that were her brethren to spill through at last to claim it as their dominion and slake their appetites.

Always, eternally, the Shadow hungered. But in this moment Ahairan was free. Free to feed herself upon blood and pain and death until she forgot even the memory of hunger.

Upon the back of the beast whose shape and self she had twisted, Ahairan sped across the desert, away from the place where she had been brought forth into this rich feeding ground. Four creatures had died at her hands before she had discovered how to twist the flesh of the fifth in the fashion she desired. Though the shape into which she had been bound was fragile and limited, it must serve her until the day of her victory had been assured. Only then could she risk what she must do to break the spells which bound her. Until that could be done, she who had been an eternal consciousness of shadow and fire was not only trapped within this form, but unable to cast any spell so powerful that it might destroy it.

But her offspring would be neither trapped nor bound. They would not be Darkness imprisoned in flesh, but Darkness fused with flesh—just as the ancient Endarkened had been.

But she was not He-Who-Is, to create such magnificent works with a wave of His hand. She must have the magic of the World of Form itself to bind her children to it. The reward of becoming her slave and consort should have gone to He-Who-Had-Called-Her; the Wildmage who had set her free. Long and long, she and her brethren had whispered to him through the flames—before she was she, before she was Ahairan—corrupting all he held dear; twisting his loyalties. When she had stood before him at last in the beautiful tomb of flesh that he had fashioned for her; he should have fallen down before her and worshiped her, become her creature, her plaything, hers to do with as she chose.

And he had not. He had dared to command her; and in her fury she had punished him for his insolence. Yet in the end, both hunger and caution had led Ahairan to flee rather than fight. He-Who-Had-Called-Her drew his power from a Bond with one of the Dragonkind, and Ahairan did not fear them, but she had known—even as she stood upon the sands below the Lake of Fire—that if she cast the single spell to slay He-Who-Had-Called-Her and all his people, in the instant of his death, all his dragon's great power would be his for the casting of one last spell. And such a Great Spell might be sufficient to unmake her flesh-form and set her wandering the World of Form as a disembodied, eternally-ravenous, spirit.

She would seek elsewhere—reluctantly—for a consort prince.

Upon the back of her spell-twisted mount, she had outraced the storm He-Who-Had-Called-Her had summoned, fleeing across the hard lifeless clay into the sands beyond. The atish'ban-shotor she had created was swifter than the flight of a dragon, faster than the fastest unicorn. With its limbs strengthened by her spells, it would reach the bounds of the great northern city that Ahairan had glimpsed in the thoughts of He-Who-Had-Called-Her before the sun had set in the sky. There she would find many to do her bidding.

And to feed upon.

But as she neared the far edge of the desert, a whirlwind sprang up before her. No matter how she drove the beast beneath her; the swirling column of sand was there before her. At last Ahairan realized it was not to be evaded.

"Show yourself," she said harshly, dragging the atish'ban-shotor to a halt.

Released from the complex web of spells she had woven around it to shield it as it ran, the spell-twisted beast stood gasping and trembling, its entire body shuddering with the thundering beat of its heart. Blood-tinged foam dripped from its mouth as it sank to its knees, and as Ahairan stepped delicately to the sand, it gave one last convulsive heave, rolled to its side, and died. Almost absently, she drew the last ebbing flickers of its life into herself, though its pain and incomprehension were far sweeter and more satisfying. Before she was finished, the whirlwind had stilled, the sand it had held falling to the sand below with a soft drumming. The figure that stood revealed was one that Ahairan knew.

“Firecrown,” Ahairan said. “Have you come to pledge me your fealty?” She did not fear the Firecrown—it had already served as her ally once. Instead, she cast about for some new being which she could entrap and make atish’ban, for it occurred to her now that she had released the atish’ban-shotor’s life too quickly for her purposes. Already she could sense intelligences moving toward her in response to her summons. Some she would reshape, some she would feed upon, some were hers already, roused from their long sleep by her presence.

“Not yet, Ahairan,” the Firecrown answered. “I have come to speak.”

“The time for speech is past,” Ahairan answered sharply. “You who were cast down and forgotten—at least you were worshiped once. Your hunger to receive that again is nothing—nothing at all—to mine to receive it for the first time! But I will be generous and merciful. Aid me now, and I promise you shrines and worshipers of your own.”

The sun beat down upon both of them from a cloudless sky, and beneath her bare feet Ahairan felt the heat of the desert sand. Wind moved over her skin, stirred her robes and her hair, carrying with it the sere and complex scents of the desert. Heat—color—form—life—so much complexity and abundance that its mere existence was nearly sustenance enough.

“It is simple enough to promise that which is not yet in one’s gift,” the Firecrown answered.

“It will be,” Ahairan said confidently. The Time-bound were oblivious to the realities and truths of the realm through which they moved. Their ignorance would lead to their destruction.

“So you believe,” the Firecrown told her. “You believe it will be a simple matter to discover a Mage who will give you that which you must have: blood and power tied to this world, from which you may breed up the race which will make it your throne.”

“I have seen into the mind of the one who brought me here,” Ahairan answered haughtily. “The power of Darkness was broken and banished long ago—so they believe. Those whom they name the Endarkened are barely a legend. None among them will believe that any of their race would be foolish enough to open that door again. I may go where I please and take whom I please. They will not know me for what I am until it is too late.”

“If that were so, then how could it be that your summoner feared opposition to his task? If you gazed deeply enough into his mind to see all that you say that you have, then you have seen that also. For what other reason did he waken me from my sleep save to serve as his weapon, though I am no man’s servant. He thought he had conjured up an Elemental Spirit that he could force to serve his will, not knowing that he had awakened in truth what he had named in mockery. I have walked the world for a full wheel of the seasons, seeking out that which was the cause of my interrupted rest, and so I tell you: your coming has been foretold.”

“What does that matter? My power is still greater than theirs. Or do you mean to do the bidding of He-Who-Has-Called-Me after all? Do not think he will honor the bargains he has made with you any more than he meant to honor his promises to me,” Ahairan answered.

“He has made me no promises,” the Firecrown answered. “And I have not yet made any to you. I merely tell you that your coming has been foretold. If you mean to journey northward to find Wildmages garbed in robes of blue you will search in vain. Since that day many years ago when a certain child whom the Wildmages call the Fire-Crowned Boy was brought to one of them to be Healed of an illness, all Wildmages have known he was the destined Champion of the Light, and no Champion is ever born if one will not be needed against the Darkness. They have known since that day that you would come in his lifetime, and the Elvenkind have known of your coming for even longer. Do you still think it will be so easy a matter to go into the Northern Lands and claim that which you seek?”

“Yes!” Ahairan shouted. Anger was tied to flesh, and rage was a new sensation, one which she relished as much as she relished heat and cold and pain. She refused to believe there was anything she could not do, for she was Ahairan, the Darkness-in-Flesh, and soon this world would be hers to do with as she chose. “Your words are empty—they cannot turn me from my path!”

“Perhaps they cannot,” the Firecrown agreed. “And perhaps you will only find destruction where you hope to claim victory. The sleep of the Great Powers has been long—longer even than that of the children of the Dark—and it may be that even such as we may die, if we are forgotten for long enough. That I know not, but I know this: your kind are truly mortal.”

Ahairan recoiled with a hiss. The World of Form held so many things that she and her brethren craved desperately, but it also held one thing they feared: in this Time-bound realm it was possible for all that they were to be unmade beyond all possibility of resurrection.

“Then join me and ensure that you are remembered forever!” Ahairan urged again. “You are a Great Power—neither truly of the Light nor of the Dark! Those who once worshiped you are gone—join your power to mine, and together this world will be ours!”

“You make an interesting offer, though it would be far more interesting were it tendered by a Queen in the fullness of her power. Will you continue north—and set yourself—alone and without allies—against the gathered power of the Elven Lands in the fullness of their strength? Or will you remain here, and bring one of the Wildmages here into your service? Or perhaps the High Mage, for even he will do.”

Ahairan hesitated. The Firecrown’s words must hold some hidden trap. She was certain of this, for why else would the Firecrown not ally itself with her immediately and instead require her to prove her power first? Perhaps it meant her to destroy herself, so that it could regain its ancient power and be worshiped once more as it had been so long ago. No matter what promises she made, Ahairan had no intention of sharing her worship and her power with any but her own kind. And yet . . . the Firecrown embodied the essence of the race which had once worshiped it, and the Firesprites’ great gift had been the art of prophecy. Perhaps it could already see its future betrayal?

But no. If that were the case, it would already have attempted to strike her down, and it had not. It could not see what she intended, any more than He-Who-Had-Called-Her had been able to gaze upon the moment of her embodiment in flesh and see his fate.

Yet if the Firecrown could not see its own fate, it could still see hers, and so Ahairan knew that of the two choices it had set before her, one must lead to her destruction and the other to her victory. But which should she choose?

Obviously, to venture northward against an enemy forewarned was madness, and so her wisest course was to remain here. She had fled from He-Who-Had-Called-Her once, but with sufficient time and cunning she could tempt him, taint him, cause him to despair. Thus, she should abandon her plans to go into the Northern Lands. Remain here, take He-Who-Had-Called-Her for her consort prince as she had originally planned, and make this place into her stronghold.

But . . . what if remaining here was the path of folly? What of the Fire-Crowned Boy? If the Elvenkind had believed him to be the destined Champion of the Light, perhaps he had the power to interfere in her plans? Then, surely, to go on as she had first intended was the wiser course.

“I should destroy you now,” she snarled, angry that no course of action seemed clear.

“If you could, I would have felt no need to warn you, for your power would already be so great that nothing could withstand it,” the Firecrown said simply. “I have spoken nothing but truth. The Elvenkind count many powerful Dragonbond Mages among their numbers, and they have known of your coming for many lifetimes of the Kings of Men. This is truth. From the moment the Fire-Crowned Boy sought Healing, the Wildmages have known he would grow to be the Champion of the Light. This, too, is truth. The Wildmages of the Northern Lands do not go among their people openly. Instead, they work in

secret, and no man may say if any he encounters is a wielder of the Wild Magic. Truth again. There are three here who know you for what you are and who will serve the purpose of your magic. This is the last truth I have for you, Ahairan. I will offer you no more gifts.”

She hesitated, thinking even now of setting her power against that of the Firecrown. Here. Now. Perhaps, despite its words, she was the stronger. But “perhaps” was not enough certainty. Though she could not gaze into its thoughts as she could with the mortal Bound-in-Time, she could see far more of its true self than such as they might see. And for all her arrogance, Ahairan reluctantly had to admit the possibility that a Greater Power might perhaps be a match for Elemental Darkness.

And beyond these things, her magic told her that—just as it had said—the Firecrown had not lied.

“Upon the day that I possess the power of a Mage of this world, will you come and lay your crown at the foot of my throne?” Ahairan demanded.

“Upon that day, I shall do all that you wish,” the Firecrown answered gravely.

Ahairan nodded, and turned her back upon it, walking back into the desert.

She would build a stronghold . . . here. She would do her work in secret—choosing her consort, gaining his fealty, establishing her fortresses, summoning her armies, and—when all had gone as she wished—breeding up a new race of Demons to rule here. If He-Who-Had-Called-Her could not be made to serve her desires, there were two more. Should all three fail her . . .

Then she would go into the Northern Lands.

Six



Prelude to War

TIERCEL AWOKE AS the sky began to lighten. He was cold and disoriented.

He remembered going for a walk last night. It had been cold, but he hadn't wanted to go back to the others, so he'd gone around the far side of one of the big piles of sand and then down by the lake, because he'd known it would be warm there. But in the predawn chill the air was filled with a thick wet mist that had risen from the surface of the lake, so even though Harrier had obviously come down after he was asleep and covered him with a makeshift blanket, and even though the lake still radiated heat, Tiercel was freezing. He couldn't see anything but the faint grayness of the mist.

His confusion was increased by the fact that he knew he'd been dreaming—vividly—of the desert at midday. Of the Red Man and the Fire Woman. It was odd, after so long, to think of them by other names. Firecrown. Ahairan. He wondered if it had been a dream at all, or simply another sort of vision. If it had been, it was the useless kind he couldn't remember anything much about once he awoke. He just had the uneasy feeling that something had happened that he *ought* to remember and didn't.

He wondered why he still had visions. He wondered why he'd ever had visions in the first place. The Wild Magic was a living thing, alive enough for Harrier to argue with it as furiously as if it were one of his older brothers, but the High Magick was as much a machine as one of the dockyard cranes at Armethalich Port. It could do many things, but it contained no spells of prophecy in its vast library of spells. Either what Tiercel was seeing was happening *now* . . . or his visions weren't related to the High Magick at all.

He decided not to think about that right now. There wasn't anything he could do about it one way or the other. And if he was lucky—very lucky—it wouldn't be important.

“Or perhaps the High Mage, for even he will do,” Tiercel muttered aloud.

He wondered where the words had come from. A scrap of his visions? In that case, he wished he remembered more of it, because *he* was the High Mage. He was the only one there was. You had to be born with the MageGift to master the High Magick, but you wouldn't know you had it until you were in your teens. Then there would be “signs”—according to the ancient histories that he'd read—but none of them said what they were. What they did say was that if the MageGift wasn't trained when the “signs” appeared, the young High Mage would die. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he'd first played with the High Magick, and for moonturns after that, everybody'd wondered why he was so sick. But the question Tiercel now knew they should all have been asking was why was he still alive. He should have died long before he and Harrier had set off for Sentarshadeen. He thought that the reason he hadn't died from the MageGift was because of the Wildmage who had Healed him when he'd been a baby. He wondered if the reason the MageGift hadn't been appearing anymore was because Wildmage Healers simply cured everyone who was brought to them showing signs of it. He wondered if they'd stop Healing the MageGift now that the High Magick was necessary once more. He wondered if there'd be *time* for another High Mage to grow up.

Maybe. If they could trap Ahairan now. A day, even an hour, might be precious.

He got to his feet. Every muscle protested, cold and stiff and aching. He ignored them. Today he'd find Bisochim. Somehow. And today he'd make him listen, no matter what he had to do.



HARRIER wasn't sure which was worse: expecting to be dead and then not being dead, or not being sure whether or not he was happy to still be alive. Or maybe the worst part was that he was *starting to lose count* of how many times he'd been in this situation. Was this the third time? Or the fifth? He wasn't sure. Of course, this was the first time he'd ever found out that Darkness had *definitely* been summoned back into the world again for the first time since the Great Flowering and was free to do as it pleased. So *that* part was new.

He didn't know what to do. He wasn't even really sure of what *not* to do. What he was sure of was that Bisochim *wasn't* Shadow-Touched. Bisochim had been tricked, just like Lycaelon the Mock-Mage in the Festival tales, but that didn't mean he hadn't been really stupid, and it didn't mean he shouldn't pay for what he'd done, because it didn't matter how badly you'd been tricked, or how much you wanted to believe something was true . . . summoning up Demons was just never a good idea.

Harrier had spent a long night thinking about it last night—some of it staring into the fire, some of it walking back to check on Tiercel, some of it just walking around making sure that Zanattar and the rest of the Isvaieni were as cowed and obedient (or at least as *somewhere else*) as the two Nalzindar seemed to think they'd be. Shaiara had spelled him for a watch or two, but despite his exertions over the long hard day, Harrier had been too keyed-up to sleep. There'd been too much to think about. And this might be the last chance he had for the peace and quiet in which to do it.

He never wanted to kill anyone again as long as he lived. But there were a lot of people in the world, and if killing Bisochim would've saved all of them from Ahairan, he'd have done it. He didn't think it would. And punishment and revenge were perfectly good reasons to kill Bisochim, too, except that Bisochim wouldn't be the only one who died. Saravasse would die too.

Harrier had never thought about dragons all that much, except at Flowering Festival every year, when the story of the Great Flowering was told, and with it the tales of Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy and the Magic Unicorn Shalkan, of Vestakia the Redeemed, Cilamen First Magistrate, the Blessed Saint Idalia, Jermayan Dragon-Rider and Ancaladar Star-Crowned. Nobody ever talked about the price Ancaladar had to pay so that Jermayan was able to go to war against the Endarkened. And Elves lived for centuries instead of decades.

For moonturns, Harrier had watched Tiercel worrying about Ancaladar's life being cut short, just as if Tiercel's life wasn't going to be cut short too. Bisochim had probably been worrying about the same thing from the moment he Bonded with Saravasse. Worrying and looking for some way around it. Harrier wasn't sure what would make you crazier: listening to Demons until you thought it was a good idea to call one of them up—or finding out afterward that was what you'd done. It hardly

mattered, since Bisochim had done both. He knew that Tiercel couldn't see that Bisochim was crazy (not evil, Harrier admitted—scrupulously fair even in his own mind—just crazy), because Tiercel never saw the worst in anybody. He hadn't been willing to see it in Zanattar outside Tarnatha'Iteru. And he couldn't see it in Bisochim now.

And what does that make you? Harrier asked himself. *Because you can see it. And you're still planning to send Tyr off with the crazy Wildmage and his dragon—and oh, here's a thought: Ancaladar said that he could hear Tyr's thoughts, so what if Bisochim's driven Saravasse as crazy as he is?*

There's no other choice, he told himself. And though he tried to think of some other—*better*—solution, when the sky began to lighten, he still hadn't thought of one.



AFTER spending so many sennights getting used to the diamond-bright aridity of the desert air, finding everything suddenly shrouded in morning mist was another unexpected change. Harrier added more charcoal to the brazier while Ciniran and Shaiara went down to the lake to bring back water. There wasn't much charcoal left, but they couldn't stay here long anyway—and keeping warm would be the least of their worries soon. An hour, maybe two at most, and they'd need to seek shelter from the sun. And the only shelter to be found was in the Isvaieni tents.

About the time Harrier thought he was going to have to go looking for Tiercel, Tiercel came wandering across the grass toward him, the heavy length of curtain fabric Harrier had found to use as a makeshift blanket folded and slung over one shoulder. He looked rumpled and damp and unsettled, though Harrier knew Tiercel had slept for at least part of the night.

"It seems funny for everything to be so wet," Tiercel said as he squeezed between the table and a large chest to settle beside the fire. His voice was hoarse and a little raspy—probably from spending the night out in the damp. He set the folded curtain down carefully on the carpet and sat down beside it, holding his hands out to the warmth of the coals. "Everything's wet," he added.

"It's the lake," Harrier said. "The mist should burn off in about a chime." He glanced up, then got to his feet. Shaiara and Ciniran were returning, carrying the heavy—full—can of water between them. "And we need to be gone from here in about an hour anyway."

"The lake is still warm!" Ciniran announced, her tones conveying her amazement.

"Don't they have hot springs in the desert?" Tiercel asked her.

"Why would they need hot springs in the desert, Tyr?" Harrier asked. "They've got hot . . . desert."

He looked around at piles of sand and grass and desert and the mist-shrouded trees in the distance. He heard a dog bark, the sound flattened by the fog. He glanced back at Shaiara. She hadn't said anything, but her mouth was set in that particular way that wasn't exactly anger and wasn't exasperation either, and Harrier knew she was thinking that the North must be a place she really didn't want to go if the *iteru* were hot and frozen water fell out of the sky. He sighed.

"We'll eat. And then I guess we'd better manage to find Bisochim," he said.

"First you will garb yourself appropriately," Shaiara said determinedly.

They argued while they finished off the last of the cheese and dried fruit from the night before. A few handfuls of raisins and dried figs, a little cheese, and a couple of tankards of water wasn't much of a breakfast in Harrier's opinion, but it was a lot better than no breakfast at all. He presented the same reasonable arguments against dressing as a southern Wildmage that he had last night, reminding Shaiara that people who thought he and Tiercel were probably Demons weren't going to change their minds just because he changed his clothes.

"They can't *all* have ridden with Zanattar," Tiercel said. He had a handful of raisins, but instead of eating them he was throwing them, one by one into the brazier. "And you *are* a Wildmage."

"Yeah," Harrier said crossly. "So?"

"So custom and habit are strong, Harrier," Ciniran said. "Show yourself among the people as a Blue Robe, and they will heed your words as the Nalzindar have done."

"Meaning you can tell them what to do," Tiercel muttered, continuing to toss raisins into the fire.

"Is that true?" Harrier asked Shaiara.

"No," she said slowly, though Harrier could tell she would really have liked to say "yes." "I have never known the Blue Robes to give orders to the tribes. Even the Shadow-Touched dared not order the *Ummara*—he must bespell them, so that his words seemed to hold the honeyed sweetness of truth."

"Don't expect *me* to do that," Harrier said briefly. "Even if I could," he added after a moment's thought.

"You should still do it," Tiercel said seriously, looking up for the first time. "Not bespell them or give them orders, I mean. Well, you should probably do that too, at least the giving orders part. But dress as an Isvaieni Wildmage. And *then* give them orders. Because, um, if I can find Bisochim and talk him into bringing Saravasse here, he and I will be gone, and I don't know how long we'll be gone once we get to the Veiled Lands, and . . ."

"And if I don't tell them to do something, Zanattar's going to tell them to do something, and I'll probably like what I tell them better," Harrier said. "Great. Fine. What shall I tell them?" He didn't have to be a Knight-Mage to know that someone had to tell the Isvaieni something. That was a lesson Antarans Gillain had impressed upon his four sons early and often, both by homily and by example. It hadn't been precisely that Da didn't approve of a man thinking for himself so much as that on the Armethalieh Docks there was a time and a place for everything, including doing just as you liked.

"This place is accursed," Shaiara said suddenly. "The Isvaieni must return to the Isvai. You must put on the Blue Robes and tell them that."

Harrier paused to admire her single-mindedness. He supposed that was something you had to have when you were what amounted to Town Magistrate. He was close to resigned to dressing up like an idiot at this point, since both she and Tiercel seemed set on it.

But.

"They'll scatter," he said. "Ahairan will be able to pick them off in twos and threes—if she's out there, and *if* we reach the Isvai before Tiercel gets back from the Veiled Lands with some Elven Mages. And while—no offense, Shaiara—I wouldn't lose any sleep if they *all* died, I wouldn't want to give any Demon that kind of satisfaction."

Or that much power, he didn't add. The *Book of the Light* didn't go into detail about how the Endarkened had gained power for their magic, and so he hadn't known the details until Tiercel'd told him. Until Tiercel had started studying magic *properly*, it hadn't occurred to Harrier that magic was as much a matter of buying and selling as any transaction done in the Port Chandler's store. Only magic "bought" and "sold" in a different currency than the golden suns and silver stars of Armethalieh.

Tiercel laughed sharply, tossing the last of the raisins in his hand into the fire all at once. They hissed and bubbled on the coals, burning with small white flames, and for a moment the scent of burning sugar overlaid the scent of smoke and charcoal. "They won't scatter," he said, getting to his feet and brushing his hands clean against his robes. "Not even if it takes us half a year to get back. You've seen them, Har. They're an army now."

"Oh that's just great," Harrier snarled in exasperation. He set his swords carefully down on the carpet and stood. The sun was over the horizon by now and it was already starting to get warm. "Maybe I should just tell them we're marching on Armethalieh while we're waiting for you? Because—if you've managed to forget—it's going to be really damned hard for an army like that to *feed* itself out in the middle of the desert for more than a sennight or two, even if they eat all the animals that we

spent most of yesterday getting back here. We had enough trouble watering ten *shotors* along the Dove Road. How are they going to move thousands of people—and sheep—and goats—and *chickens*—?”

“It can be done,” Shaiara said firmly. “If it is the will of the Wild Magic.”

If he didn’t get out of here—right now—Harrier was either going to break into hysterical laughter or strangle somebody. He scooped up his swords again and strode over to the chest over which Shaiara had draped the pieces of the ridiculous Wildmage costume. In the pale morning light the fabric was very *very* blue. He grabbed the bundle of cloth and strode off behind the dune to change.

Once he got there, he slipped his carrying bag off his shoulder and set it carefully on the grass. It wasn’t the one that Lanya had given him at Black-rowan Farm, but before they’d all left Abi’Abadshar, Marap had given him one of closely-knotted cords in a style similar to those the Nalzindar used to carry small game. It was not a gift, Marap had assured him carefully, but repayment for his generosity in sharing his knowledge with her so freely. Gift or “repayment,” it held his books and small packets of the few useful plants he’d been able to identify at Abi’Abadshar. And it was better than his lost leather bag in one way—when he’d been caught out in the storm, the rain had just trickled through the open weave. The rain should have completely ruined his Three Books, but of course it hadn’t. Harrier had decided to stop being impressed by their ability to survive and endure. They were magic, and that was what magic things did. He set his swords beside the bag, and began to undress. It would be nice to go for a morning swim, but there were half-a-dozen good reasons not to, ranging from the fact that now that it was light the Isvaieni might decide to come up here and finish what they’d started yesterday to the fact that he couldn’t *really* be sure about what was in the lake.

Shaiara talked about the will of the Wild Magic as if it were something he ought to be able to guess at. Or know. And Harrier didn’t think that was possible—and not just because he wasn’t that good a Wildmage. He didn’t think that was something *anyone* could do, no matter how good a Wildmage they were. He thought you *might* be able to tell what the Wild Magic wanted you to do at any particular moment, and you *might* be able to guess why, but you’d probably never know why, and he wasn’t really sure he wanted to guess.

He pulled off his *chadar* and used it to scrub his hair, then his face. He wondered whose robes these had been. Probably Bisochim’s. Too bad. He started unwrapping the long oversash from the robe he was wearing. The proper length for a sash was (Shaiara had told him) supposed to be twice the height of the wearer. Which meant that Harrier’s hand-me-down sashes were eternally too short. It didn’t make that much of a difference, really—it was the difference between twelve feet of sash and about ten feet of sash—but it wasn’t *right*, and that annoyed him.

As he unwrapped it, he continued to brood. He suspected that when Shaiara said things like “*if it is the will of the Wild Magic*” she was thinking the way he’d thought a year and more ago, of the Wild Magic deciding that something would be a good idea and then arranging for it to happen. And he wasn’t even quite sure if he’d be able to discover from the Wild Magic if trying to take ten thousand people (and sheep, and goats, and *shotors*, and chickens) across the Barahileth would work, or if the attempt would just get them all killed. Maybe the Wild Magic wanted all the Isvaieni dead now. It certainly hadn’t done anything to keep the southern Wildmages alive.

The Dark tricked Bisochim, and Bisochim killed the Wildmages, and Zanattar found out that they were dead, so Zanattar destroyed the Iteru-cities and killed everyone in them. And the Wild Magic could have made any part of that not happen. And it didn’t. And I don’t know why. And I still believe that the Wild Magic is ultimately Good. And I hate believing that, because even if it’s Good, it won’t keep people safe. Not particular people like Tyr and Ciniran and Shaiara and Ma and Da. It’s for something a lot bigger, and . . . and I’m afraid of something so big that it can let ten cities be destroyed because maybe it doesn’t notice. Maybe they’re too small for it to see. Or maybe they had to be destroyed so that Good could win. And maybe the Wild Magic thinks all the deaths will be worth it. I guess—if all those people died to keep the Dark from coming back—if you could ask all of them if they’d do that—they’d say “yes.” But nobody did. And I guess if I have to die and all the people in the tents down there have to die for the same thing, it’s okay. But I thought there’d be battles. And I thought somebody would ask. This way—if I die, if they die—none of us will ever know what it was for.

He supposed it wouldn’t be any different than dying when your ship was caught in a gale at sea—or hit a reef—or ran afoul of one of the thousand other disasters to be found in the midst of Great Ocean. Those sailors and crewmen hadn’t died *for* anything. They’d just died. He supposed he’d gotten too used to thinking of what he and Tiercel were doing as being *for* something, as if that meant it would have special rules.

“Guess not,” he said aloud.

He was down to his undertunic by now. He sorted through the pile of fabric. There was even an undertunic to change into, dyed the same intense blue as everything else. A lot of the trade that crossed Armethalieh Dock was southern dyestuffs . . .

Had been, Harrier reminded himself sharply. Not this year, or for years to come.

The oversash was twice as wide as what he was used to, and he found that careful folding allowed him to tuck his Three Books and his packets of herbs directly into it and dispense with his bag entirely. At least the *chadar* was the same size and shape as he was used to—though of course it, too, was blue. Once he had it wrapped securely into place and tucked into the collar of his robe, he buckled his swords into their accustomed position and carefully folded his discarded garments. He couldn’t imagine what he looked like. Probably something really stupid.

But when he walked back to the others, Ciniran stared at him wide-eyed and Shaiara looked relieved. Even Tiercel didn’t look as if he could figure out precisely what he wanted to say.

“It is as I have said,” Shaiara said, after a long pause.

“All right,” Harrier said. “Fine. Let’s go find Bisochim before Zanattar finds us.”

“You look kind of intimidating,” Tiercel said in a low voice, as they walked away from their campsite.

“By the Light, I hope so,” Harrier answered, equally softly.



THEY’D searched everywhere last night without finding Bisochim. Today, once they came around the edge of the sand pile, he could plainly be seen standing on the far side of the lake. In the daylight, now that the mist had lifted, the full extent of the lake was clearly visible at last. It was enormous—perhaps two miles straight across—and (just as Harrier had said last night) a perfect circle that reflected the pale blue of the morning sky.

Shaiara and Ciniran stopped dead when they got their first sight of the lake.

“It is as large as—As your Great Ocean,” Ciniran exclaimed softly, her eyes round with shock.

“So much open water,” Shaiara murmured in distress.

“It’s all right,” Tiercel said quietly. “It’s just a lake. It’s normal.”

Harrier cleared his throat loudly, trying not to laugh. Tiercel knew perfectly well that there was nothing normal about this lake. But there was no point in upsetting Shaiara and Ciniran any more than they were upset already. “Come on,” he said.

There wasn’t any grass on the far side of the lake—or around the sides. The grass grew all along the near edge of the lake and then simply stopped abruptly. Yesterday all the grass had been green and lush, but in the morning light it looked wilted, its color less brilliant. Maybe it hadn’t been Bisochim’s power that’d made this

place, as they'd thought. Or maybe he'd gotten tired of maintaining the spells that kept everything here alive. It'd be a good idea, Harrier thought, to remember that the person they were all about to annoy still had the power to strike them all dead, assuming he wanted to.

But right now Bisochim didn't even seem to want to get away from them. He simply stood there and *waited*, staring down into the lake, and as they got closer, Harrier realized that Shaiara and Ciniran were hanging back, letting him and Tiercel go on ahead. He supposed it was just as well, though it wasn't as if Bisochim couldn't kill them wherever they were standing.

"Let me talk to him," Tiercel said, as they approached.

Harrier made a rude noise. "Because that's been working out so well up till now?"

"Well, what are *you* going to do, *hit him*?" Tiercel challenged.

"Maybe," Harrier said grudgingly. Tiercel ignored him.

"Hi," Tiercel said, coming to a stop about ten feet away from Bisochim. "I guess I figured we could talk some more about going to the Elven Lands. We'll need help if we're going to find and defeat Ahairan."

"We are enemies, you and I," Bisochim said, addressing his remarks to the lake. "I am the enemy of all that you hold dear. I have sought your life, with my own spells and through the arts of my creatures. Those whom you loved have died by my hand."

There was a moment of silence.

"Yeah, I know," Tiercel answered. His voice was quiet and ragged. "I was there. The things you did killed my friends. You made me have to kill people, too. And I'm not sure which of those two things is harder for me to live with."

Harrier glanced sideways at Tiercel, surprised and wary. His friend's face was changed, and the changes had come so slowly and gradually that Harrier had never noticed them before. He'd just gone on thinking of Tiercel as being the same boy he'd ridden out of Armethaliev with a year ago. But that wasn't who Tiercel had been for a while. Grief, and fear, the things he'd lost and the things he'd done, had etched themselves into Tiercel's face like the marks of physical pain, and suddenly Harrier wondered what Tiercel saw when he looked at him.

"Then you know that I cannot face Saravasse with such a burden upon my heart," Bisochim said, finally turning to face them.

"I know you were tricked by the Dark," Tiercel said patiently. "But before there were Men at all, dragons chose to Bond and die so that they could fight for the Light. It isn't fair for you to take Saravasse's chance to fight for the Light away from her now. I know that Ancaladar would . . . would have forgiven me for anything I did, whether I was sorry I'd done it or not, and Saravasse will forgive you. Because you *are* sorry."

"And the longer you wait, the more she'll have to forgive you for," Harrier interrupted harshly. "Because *you* might be standing around here thinking about how sorry you are that you were tricked, but that thing you let loose is out there somewhere, and *it* isn't sorry to be free, and I don't know what its plans are, but if we're very lucky they involve *hiding*."

Tiercel gave him a look that was a combination of hurt and indignation, but Harrier knew he was doing the right thing. They could either spend hours trying to persuade Bisochim to do what they needed him to do, or they could find out right now for sure that he wouldn't. It was morning, and every minute wasted *talking* was a minute in which Zanattar could decide that this wasn't "Wildmage business" after all—or just decide to come up and see what was going on—or in which Ahairan could come back to finish what she started.

"Your power is not great enough to withstand her," Bisochim said, turning his back and starting to walk away.

Harrier rushed forward and grabbed his arm, dragging him to a stop. "Weren't you *listening* yesterday?" he demanded. "That's why you're going to the Elven Lands! You're taking Tyr there so he can ask them to send Elven Mages after your Demon. Tyr's going because the Elves like him. You're going because it's your dragon. Call her. *Now*."

For a moment, staring into Bisochim's eyes, Harrier thought Bisochim would refuse. Or explain again about his unworthiness. Or just strike him dead. Instead he bowed his head and sighed.

"Very well."

For several minutes nothing happened, except that the sun rose higher in the sky and the day got hotter. Then:

"Look," Tiercel said, pointing.

There was a familiar shape in the sky, silhouetted against the sun. A dragon.



TIERCEL knew it wasn't Ancaladar, but the sight of the familiar dragon-shape against the sky still made him ache with longing. To be with Ancaladar, to know where he was, *how* he was . . .

He hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye.

From the beginning, he, Jernayan, Harrier, even Bisochim had all thought it was unbearable that dragons, born immortal, should die because they Bonded. And Tiercel still thought that. But now he thought that the hidden mercy in the Dragonbond was that if the dragon died, their Bonded did too, because no one should have to survive who'd once been a part of such a joining. He didn't think he could explain that even to Bisochim.

The dragon—it must be Saravasse—circled once and landed a few dozen yards away. The landing looked neat and graceful—a winged thing floating delicately to earth—but even with her wings spread and beating, the ground shook as she came to rest.

Tiercel knew already that dragons came in different colors. He'd seen a lot of different-colored dragons in the Elven Lands—Petrivoch had been blue—and Saravasse was a brilliant scarlet. The sunlight shining through the membranes of her spread wings turned them a glowing orange-red, like the flesh of ripe *naranjes*, and her scales glittered in every shade from bright hot ruby on the large plates along her skull to dark garnet-black on the smaller scales that edged along toward her flanks and tail. She was only about two-thirds the size of Ancaladar, but she was still nearly the size of a full-rigged sailing vessel. She folded her wings and stood gazing down at them.

"I have summoned Saravasse at your bidding," Bisochim said coldly. "Let us go."

"I . . . wait. Aren't you going to introduce us?" Tiercel asked.

Bisochim turned away from him, as if his words held no meaning. "Come here," he said harshly, and Saravasse stepped forward. No. *Shunk*. Head down, crouching, and it would have been ridiculous in something that size if it weren't so . . . pitiful.

Tiercel inhaled sharply, trying to conceal his shock, though nobody was looking at him but Harrier, who was just as stunned as he was. Harrier wouldn't use a tone like that with one of the Port's sentry-dogs, and Harrier didn't particularly *like* the Port's sentry-dogs.

Saravasse reached Bisochim and lowered herself into a crouch. It was the same position Ancaladar had assumed hundreds of times so that Tiercel could clamber the several dozen feet up to the saddle on his neck. But everything about it was different.

"I . . . my name is Tiercel," Tiercel said, walking up to Saravasse's head. "I . . . I was Bonded once. To Ancaladar. Did you know him? They say he isn't dead and

that's why I'm still alive. Do you know—?”

“She will not answer you, boy,” Bisochim interrupted brusquely. “She does not speak any longer. Come, if you would have us do your bidding.” He turned away, walking back toward her shoulder and beginning the climb up onto her neck.

Tiercel waited another moment, but Saravasse said nothing.

“Be careful,” Harrier said, his voice barely a whisper.

“It's a little late for that, isn't it?” Tiercel answered sadly. He turned and followed Bisochim.



HARRIER hadn't liked this idea when he'd had it, and he hadn't liked it when he'd thought about it through the night, and he hadn't liked it this morning when he'd somehow finally managed to force Bisochim to go along with it. But the point at which he *really* hadn't liked it was when he'd seen Bisochim treating Saravasse the way Da hadn't even let somebody treat one of the mules that turned the Port cranes. “*People can choose and beasts can't, and if you ever forget that, I'll make you wish the Light had made you a beast instead of my son.*”

Harrier knew he couldn't *really* know what the Dragonbond was like without having been Bonded. But he knew enough to know that what he'd just seen was wrong. *Which means you were right in the first place, and Bisochim is crazy.* Being right didn't make Harrier feel any better. There still hadn't been a better solution. *Assuming, of course, that this one even works.*

It was too late now to call Tiercel back. He watched as Tiercel settled himself behind Bisochim and Saravasse got to her feet and turned away. She began to run across the desert, her body an intense blaze of color against the pale dun clay. Moments passed, and then there was a flash of orange fire as she leaped skyward, spreading her wings wide. There was an impossible moment where she seemed to hang in the air as if she were frozen midleap, then her wings pounded furiously against the air and she began to rise in the long flat spiral that Harrier remembered seeing Ancaladar use to take off.

He waited, watching. Then he realized he was holding his breath, looking for the flash of green-and-white robes against the sky as Tiercel fell, thrown to earth from Saravasse's back. He forced himself to breathe out. Breathe in. Look away.

“I had not thought . . .” Shaiara began, and stopped.

Harrier looked toward her. She and Ciniran had come up beside him as he'd watched Saravasse's takeoff run. Both of them looked troubled. It wasn't hard to guess why. Both of them had seen Tiercel with Ancaladar often enough.

“They should reach the Veiled Lands within a couple of hours,” he said. It was better than saying any of the other things he was thinking. It was better than explaining his suspicions about why Saravasse's behavior was so different from Ancaladar's. “What now?” he said.

“Now we shall go and you shall call upon the *Ummarai* to hear your counsel,” Shaiara said matter-of-factly.



IT was a little over two miles from the edge of the lake to the encampment—not a walk anybody wanted to take through the Barahileth during the day, even less than two hours after dawn. They stopped at the near side of the lake long enough to drink as much water as they could, and to pour water over themselves until their robes were soaking wet. Even Shaiara couldn't protest the waste of water when there was an entire lake of it right here.

“So much water,” Ciniran said again, gazing out across its surface. “Is it true, Harrier, that there are great oases like this all over the Cold North?”

Even now her questions made him smile. “In the north, Ciniran, this is a *small* . . . oasis. And it's a lot smaller than Great Ocean. I don't think I can describe Great Ocean, really. When we're done here, you and Shaiara should come home with me. I can show you Great Ocean, then. Don't worry about the Nalzindar, Shaiara. You can bring all of them, too. Ma will be so glad to see me back again that she won't mind a bit. And we've got plenty of room.” He wanted to believe in that future. He wanted to believe in *any* future, in a life where living beyond the next sunset wasn't so unbelievable that planning for tomorrow seemed like lying.

Shaiara regarded him as if she thought he might be telling a joke at her expense. “Are you the son of the *Ummara* of Armethalieh, Harrier? I have never asked.”

“What? Me? Oh, uh, no. I'm, uh, my Da's Portmaster, that's, um . . . He runs part of the City, but the Port belongs to the Chief Magistrate just like the rest of the City does.” It had never occurred to him before how hard it would be to explain Armethalieh to someone who'd never even seen one of the *Iteru*-cities—and Tamatha'Iteru hadn't actually been that much bigger than all of Armethalieh Port.

“So your father is Chief Magistrate Vaunnel's trusted *chaharum*, just as Kamar is mine,” Shaiara said, having settled the matter to her satisfaction.

“Close enough,” Harrier answered, giving up.



THE grass that had been wilting at dawn was visibly dying now, turning yellow and crisp in the sunlight. As the three of them moved toward the encampment, Harrier could see that there were no longer any downed tents, and the animals no longer wandered freely. He could see Isvaieni standing beneath the canopies of their tents to watch them approach. With Harrier dressed like a giant bright blue flower (as he uncharitably thought of his outfit) he'd have been hard to miss.

No one did anything but watch at first, but when the three of them were about half a mile away from the closest tent, a party of Isvaieni came walking out to meet them. No one moved quickly in the desert heat. Shaiara had explained this to him and Tiercel before they began the journey here, speaking in the simple patient tones someone would use to impart information to a child. But it was a lesson Harrier had already learned from hours of sword practice in the Telchi's walled garden at Tamatha'Iteru. The desert heat could kill. You didn't exert yourself unless the matter was urgent. And so he didn't assume that the leisurely approach of the two dozen Isvaieni meant that they were friendly. At least Zanattar wasn't with them.

The Isvaieni stopped about thirty feet away and waited for the three of them to reach them. Harrier didn't draw his swords. He wouldn't do that unless he didn't have any other choice. The truth was, they had no choices *now*. It was as true today as it had been yesterday: they were trapped here. They'd never reach Abi'Abadshar without shelter and supplies, and they couldn't steal either one in a hurry. If they *did* run, they'd certainly be followed, which meant that all they could do by running would be lead their pursuers to the rest of the Nalzindar. But when the three of them reached the group of Isvaieni, they parted, allowing Harrier, Shaiara, and Ciniran to pass between them—if they chose.

It was nerve-racking for Harrier to walk calmly forward as if these people—people who thought he was a Demon and Shaiara and Ciniran were Shadow-Touched—weren't his enemies. But he could tell that there was something different, at least for some of them, in how they saw him today than in how they'd seen him yesterday. Today they didn't see an outsider, a Demon. Now they saw the blue robes and reacted as if he were wearing the high-crowned hat and carrying the gilded staff of office of the Chief Magistrate herself.

He couldn't tell whether the ones who were willing to see him as a Wildmage were the ones who'd stayed behind when Zanattar had gone off to slaughter thousands of innocent people, or whether they were just the ones who were smart enough to believe Liapha and Bisochim instead of their own fears. It was going to be important

soon because Harrier had already gotten a pretty good idea of how the tribes were governed. It wouldn't matter if the leaders agreed to do what he said if their people didn't agree.

"Wildmage, I am Marnet, and before the Breaking of Tribes I was of the tents of the Tapingana—"

Harrier glanced toward the woman when she began to speak, but he didn't miss the grunt of contempt from the man on his other side when Marnet named her tribe. He didn't have to guess whether or not the man had ridden with Zanattar—the numerous and recent scars he bore were proof enough that he had.

"—and we all saw the dragon fly to where the Cliffs of Telinchechitl once stood and then fly away again, as it has done before when the—when Bisochim summoned it. Has he sent the stranger with it upon some errand?"

She means Tiercel, Harrier realized. For a moment he wasn't quite sure what to say. He had the feeling that telling them that Bisochim had flown away with Tiercel and Saravasse might upset them, but then he decided to simply tell the truth. While you might still get into trouble if you told the truth—and in Harrier's experience, you always did—at least you wouldn't have a complicated set of lies to remember.

"The stranger's name is Tiercel. He and Bisochim have both gone with Saravasse. I don't know how long they'll be gone."

"But why has he left us now—when we have such need of him?" Marnet asked. She sounded so distressed that Harrier had to keep himself from looking back toward Shaiara to see if she had any idea why.

"The Wildmage Harrier has come to give his counsel to the leaders of the tribes for this reason," Shaiara answered, with a confidence Harrier had to admire. "Will Ogmazad offer the shelter of the tents of the Tapingana to the Blue Robe so that he may speak?"

"The Tapingana have always honored the Blue Robes, Nalzindar. None may say otherwise," Marnet said sharply. "So it shall be upon this day, as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow."

"So you say, Marnet. And Zanattar says that this is no Blue Robe at all. You may dress a *shotor*-calf in fine robes—but I would not wed it!" the man who had jeered at her said.

"As to that, Turlam, the *shotor* probably would not have *you* either!" someone else said, and several people laughed.

"You! Demonspawn! Why should we now believe you are a Wildmage, when all know that they have been slain by our enemies?" Turlam said.

Harrier glanced toward Turlam, but didn't stop walking. "Do you have any idea how *annoying* you are?" he demanded. "If I were a Demon, you'd be dead. Yes, all the Wildmages in the Isvai are dead. I'm from Armethalieh. Idiot." He turned away and walked just a bit faster.

Everyone here had heard of Armethalieh. According to *The Book of the Light*, it was where the Queen of the Endarkened had been slain by the death-spell of the Blessed Saint Idalia. Now half the Isvaieni wanted to ask Harrier questions about Armethalieh while the other half wanted to make rude jokes at Turlam's expense. Harrier ignored them all. He was doing his best not to think of the Isvaieni surrounding them as guards or jailers, but it was getting harder.

When they reached the tents, Marnet hurried away. Even now, she didn't run.

Shaiara came up to walk beside him once they reached the tent-city itself. Mostly, Harrier suspected, to make sure he didn't trip over the bewildering array of tent-ropes, or accidentally walk into somebody's tent by mistake. There were hundreds of tents, and they just seemed to be scattered in no particular order between the orchards and the lake. Some of them had colored pennants (in every color but blue—Harrier noticed that now that he was looking for it) flying from the top tentpole. Some had colorful cloth curtains (still no blue) screening off the interior of the tent. Most of the tents were grayishdun, the color of the felted wool they were made of, but a few were black. The only thing that was alike from tent to tent was the bright colors of the rugs that could be seen inside of, and sometimes in front of, each one.

People called out to them as they passed. The Isvaieni with them were happy to explain that Harrier the Wildmage from Armethalieh went to honor the tents of Ogmazad of the Tapingana and there he would offer counsel to the tribes. Harrier was just glad he wasn't trying to keep any of this a secret. He wondered what he was going to say."

But now that he'd seen both Marnet's and Turlam's reactions to seeing him dressed as a southern Wildmage, Harrier watched the faces of those they passed carefully. Some looked interested and hopeful. Others looked angry. Harrier wished he knew more about what the Isvaieni thought about Wildmages. The Nalzindar believed absolutely that he was a Wildmage and had asked his advice, but they'd never been particularly *deferential*. Zanattar had attacked the *Iteru*-cities because he'd thought he was taking revenge on the people who'd killed . . . all the ones in the south. Harrier was doing his best not to think about the fact that he'd sent his best friend, alone and defenseless, off with that man. He really wished it was Tiercel here, and he was the one off with Bisochim. Tiercel was the one who liked learning weird new things. Tiercel would like figuring out everything about the Isvaieni and their Wildmages. For all Harrier knew, Tiercel would probably remember having read a book about it. He'd known Tiercel since before either of them could read, and by now Harrier was convinced that there was probably a book written about everything and that Tiercel had read it. It was just too bad that Tiercel wasn't the Wildmage and Harrier wasn't the one who could ask the Elves for special favors. Maybe Tiercel would get back soon.

Just then a young woman hurried up to the group surrounding the three of them, bringing it to a stop. She pushed her way through it until she'd reached them.

"Shaiara—*Ummara* Shaiara—Liapha of the Kadyastar asks if you and the Blue Robe will grace her tent. She says—in the name of the blood you share—there can be no charity between you, for that which would have been Ganima's blood-right may come to you." The speaker was Rinurta, the young woman they'd met the previous day. The one who'd done so much screaming.

"Say to *Ummara* Liapha that we will come," Shaiara said regally.

Rinurta hurried off. She still seemed nervous around them—or at least she didn't seem as if she was going to start screaming again. Shaiara ruthlessly elbowed her way through the Isvaieni standing around them so that the three of them could follow.

"Aren't we supposed to be going somewhere else?" Harrier asked quietly. They were still being followed, but only by about a dozen people now.

"Yes," Shaiara answered patiently. "To Ogmazad's tent. And he will know that we go now to Liapha's tent to drink *kaffeyah* and eat flatbread and so he will have time to prepare all as it should be prepared if you wish to speak to all the *Ummarai* together."



WHEN the three of them reached Liapha's tent, Harrier could see that it was no longer a makeshift kitchen, but had been refilled with chests, cushions, low tables, and that the inner partitions of the tent were lowered. Underneath the shade of the outer canopy there were half-a-dozen seating-cushions set out on the carpet in a half circle around the *kaffeyah* brazier. A pair of *ikulas*-hounds lay at ease on the carpet, regarding their approach incuriously. Rinurta stood waiting for them, and Hadyan—who must be related to Liapha somehow if he was going to be the next leader of the Kadyastar—was there too. He glowered at them sullenly, but didn't say anything.

Liapha was seated on a large cushion smoking a pipe, and Harrier caught the sweet resinous scent of *rekhattan*. In Armethalieh they fumigated warehouses with it to drive out vermin. Here, people smoked it in pipes.

"So no one is dead yet," Liapha said cheerfully. "But where is the other Northerner?"

"Is this the hospitality of the Kadyastar?" Shaiara snapped, and Liapha, continuing to smile broadly, gestured for them to be seated.

Harrier ended up sitting beside Liapha. It wasn't his idea, but he'd certainly heard Da complain about formal City banquets often enough to know about protocol. Shaiara sat on his right with Ciniran beside her. Hadyan sat on Liapha's left, and Rinurta knelt and began to prepare the *kaffeyah*. While the *kaffeyah* was boiling, Liapha spoke idly of the numbers of animals that had been recovered from the desert, of how many were still lost, of those that had injured themselves in their flight, of the unfortunate number of chickens and goats killed by free-roaming *ikulas* and unleashed falcons, of how Fannas's prize stallion had gotten among the trees and gorged itself on unripe windfall fruit, so that no man among the Kareggi could be allowed a moment's rest until Fannas discovered whether Tarush would survive his unfortunate banquet. To hear Liapha talk, Fannas's numberless foolishnesses were capped by an attachment to his horse-herd, since to hear her talk, horses were creatures which any fool could plainly see belonged in the Veiled Lands, or the Great Cold, or the Meadows of the Moon, rather than in the Isvai, let alone the Barahileth. Harrier did his best not to fidget, but the only real interest he had right now in a horse, or a herd of horses, was to wonder if one could possibly make the journey out of the Barahileth.

"I would not wish to shame the tents of the Kadyastar with the knowledge that my words hold such little savor in the ears of the Blue Robe," Liapha said.

Harrier realized that he was staring off into space. Not only did he have no idea what Liapha had just said, Rinurta was offering him the tray with *kaffeyah* cups.

"I don't think any of us really cares if somebody's horse explodes," he said to Liapha, reaching for one of the cups. "And for that matter, I wouldn't Heal the stupid thing even if Fannas asked me to." The words sounded callous even to his own ears—he didn't like to see anything in pain if he could do something to help it—but as he spoke the words he felt a faint sense of being *pushed* toward them by something outside himself. Magic carried MagePrice. He was already carrying a heavy one. He didn't dare take on another unless it was vital. *But Tiercel will be back soon!* he thought frantically. *He'll bring help!* The same inner voice that was certain he must not incur MagePrice without true need was not certain of that.

"Just so," Liapha said, while Harrier was mentally kicking himself for being rude. It wasn't as if these people couldn't still kill the three of them just because Bisochim was gone. In fact, they were far more likely to do it if Bisochim wasn't here than if he was. "And perhaps you are concerned about your friend," she added helpfully.

"Tiercel and Bisochim and Bisochim's dragon Saravasse have gone on an, um, journey together," Harrier said. He just hoped she wouldn't ask him when they'd be back. He sipped cautiously from the cup in his hands. He didn't really like *kaffeyah*. The taste and the smell conjured up memories of the siege of Tarnatha'Iteru. But it was strong and sweet and he hadn't gotten much in the way of either food or sleep since sunrise yesterday.

"So you no longer believe that Bisochim has sought your life, as you said before?" Liapha regarded him with a shrewd dark gaze, smiling faintly.

For a moment Harrier couldn't think of what he'd said yesterday, then the memory came back to him. "*Bisochim's been killing my friends for over a year now.*" "No," he said evenly, meeting her eyes unflinchingly. "That was true. But he was tricked into doing it. He knows that now."

The teasing expression faded from Liapha's eyes, and her expression grew sharp and hard. Harrier was sure she was going to ask the next question, the obvious question, the one he didn't want to answer: "*How was the great Wildmage Bisochim tricked?*" But she said nothing, merely studying his face.

"*Ummara*, I must speak! Zanattar has said—" Hadyan said.

"You must be silent!" Liapha countered sharply, raising her hand to silence him. "Zanattar does not rule the tents of the Kadyastar—not yet! Go. Fetch meat and tea and fruit, and tell Kisrah to come and make fresh flatbread, for I will not serve stale leavings to the Wildmage and the daughter of my daughter and her companion."

Harrier was sure that Hadyan was going to object—or least recite all of Zanattar's arguments in favor of Harrier's Demonhood one more time. Instead he got to his feet in silence and walked into the tent.

"And you, Rinurta, would you speak as well?" Liapha asked, but her tone was milder now.

"I would only ask—if the Blue Robe would not Heal the horse of Fannas, what of the fountains and the wells? Will he leave them to run dry?"

Fountains. Wells. Abruptly Harrier realized that when he'd been here yesterday, the air had been moist. And some of that had been from the rain, but most of it hadn't. He remembered seeing canals full of water, and fountains spraying water into the air. He couldn't see the orchards from here, but he knew the grass on the meadow between the lake and here had been dying.

"You can drink the water from the lake," he said awkwardly. "I know it's a long walk in the heat, but I've drunk it myself. It's fine." He didn't know what else to say. Even if he wanted to keep the Isvaieni here, he wasn't sure he knew how to repair the fountains. Whatever had made the lake might be the same thing that had drained them dry.

"There, child, see," Liapha said calmly. "We shall not all die by nightfall."

Harrier was saved from having to answer any further questions by the return of Hadyan with two other Kadyastar bringing food. He knew that the Isvaieni normally ate their main meals in the cool of the morning and the cool of the evening, and this long after sunrise, Liapha had already eaten. But he really wasn't in a mood to care. When the food was set out, he waited to be sure that Shaiara and Ciniran were going to eat as well. He knew just enough about the Isvaieni by now to know they had elaborate rules for *everything* and not enough to know what they were. Once Shaiara began to eat, he followed her example. The meat was beef, which was surprising, but he remembered Liapha last night saying she was going to talk somebody into slaughtering a cow. Apparently she'd succeeded. He was starting to get the idea Liapha could talk most people into most things, and that might be a good thing, as long as she was willing to talk them into the things he wanted her to talk them into.

He wondered how many of the Kadyastar had been in Zanattar's army. He wondered who they were going to follow now—Liapha or Zanattar. They couldn't follow both.

"Mutiny" was an ugly word, probably the ugliest one Harrier knew. Everyone who served the ships that sailed Great Ocean knew that no ship could have two masters. On a ship at sea, the Captain's word was law and his crew followed it. Or they mutinied, and that was never a quiet or a peaceful business. Mutiny began with murder and ended with theft and piracy, because no lawful port would allow mutineers to dock. Usually, Harrier knew, the mutineers were hanged by the crew of the ship that took theirs. The land wasn't the sea, and a tribe wasn't a ship, but Harrier had already seen what would happen if half the Isvaieni chose to follow Zanattar and the other half chose to follow Liapha and the other *Ummarai*. War. And maybe it wouldn't be war on the scale that Ancaladar had seen, but after Tarnatha'Iteru, just the thought of war made Harrier feel sick.

Blood and pain and fear. That's what the Endarkened fed on. That's what the Dark feeds on. Tiercel and Bisochim had each told him the same thing in different ways. *Ahairan is an Elemental. The Elemental Spirit of Darkness bound in flesh.* If the Isvaieni started fighting among themselves, Harrier thought that would probably be enough to bring her back here. He didn't know *exactly* what she could do, but he was pretty sure Ahairan could keep them fighting each other until every last one of them was dead.



It was just as well that no matter how hungry he was, Harrier knew better than to bolt his food in the steadily-increasing heat, because the meal was a long drawn-out process—more like a social event with food than a meal with conversation. Liapha was the leader—the *Ummara*—of the Kadyastar, and during the entire duration of the meal, men and women approached the edge of the carpet, were invited by Liapha to seat themselves, were offered *kaffeyah*, and eventually explained why they had come. It was like watching Harbormaster's Court, if Harbormaster's Court had been entirely about goats and chickens and had always ended up with people wanting to know why the dragon had come and where they were going to water their livestock. At least Liapha had answers for them.

The Kadyastar weren't the only Isvaieni who came to pay their respects to Liapha during the course of the meal, though Harrier could only tell the ones that weren't Kadyastar by the fact that they didn't come and sit down, but stood politely at the edge of the carpet. He got the impression that they'd come to look at him as much as to speak to Liapha, though nobody spoke to him directly, and the two important pieces of information—why Saravasse had come, and where the nearest water supply was—were always dropped into the discussion so casually that anyone would think they weren't the actual reason for the conversation.

The meal eventually drew to a close with tiny sweet honeycakes and more cups of *kaffeyah*. Shaiara wrinkled her nose and refused the sweets; her behavior during the entire meal had bordered on rudeness, and Harrier wished he could ask her why. Liapha didn't seem to have noticed. When the cakes had been eaten, Liapha lit her pipe once more. "I thank you for the honor of your company this day, Wildmage, and I give thanks that the Wild Magic still casts its long shadow over the Isvaieni," Liapha said.

She wouldn't say that, Harrier thought, bleakly, if she knew what he did about the Wild Magic. He wondered what he was supposed to say to answer her. He couldn't bear to lie, and a lifetime wouldn't be long enough to tell her the truth.

"Be sure that all shall go as the Wild Magic wills," Shaiara answered for him.

Liapha's words hadn't precisely been a dismissal, but they were expected at Ogmazad's tent so that Harrier could try to convince the Isvaieni to return to the Isvai, so when Shaiara set her cup back on the serving tray and rose to her feet, Harrier got up as well.

Liapha told Hadyan to conduct them to where the tents of the Tabingana were, adding that she saw no reason to hurry in order to hear again what she had already heard, since three people could not agree upon a thing, let alone thirty.

"Is that how many tribes there are?" Harrier asked Shaiara, when they were walking after Hadyan. Hadyan was walking quickly enough that Harrier thought he might be trying to lose them in the maze of tents, but between wandering dogs, wandering goats, and wandering children, it wasn't possible. His escort was a matter of courtesy, even though it was grudging courtesy. Harrier was fairly sure anybody here would be more than willing to show them where Ogmazad's tent was.

"There are as many tribes as there are nights in a moonturn, no more," Shaiara answered, after a moment's thought, "but some are so great in numbers that they have not only *Ummarai*, but very many *chaharums* as well, so they seem as if they are many tribes in one."

"*Chaharum*" was a word in the desert speech that meant, more or less, "second in command" or "deputy." "And I have to convince all these people?" Harrier asked.

"Harrier, I do not know," Shaiara answered, and her voice was troubled. "Did you ask me such a question when last the Nalzindar came to the Gathering of the Tribes I could say to you that the *chaharums* would heed the word of their *Ummarai* and know I spoke truth. Now, I cannot."

It was a fair answer, even if it wasn't very reassuring.



UMMARA Ogmazad of the Tabingana was the first portly Isvaieni Harrier had seen—not exactly *fat*, but what Ma would have called "fond of his dinner." His full thick beard was more gray than black, and the sight of it made Harrier rub his own unshaven jaw reflexively. He'd expected there to be a crowd already gathered, but the area around Ogmazad's tent was more deserted than any place in the camp that Harrier'd been yet. There weren't even any children playing nearby. Even as he noticed that, he felt himself reaching out—not with hands, or even with thoughts, but with the new part of him that worried him even while he trusted it completely. The part of him that wasn't Harrier Gillain, son of the Portmaster, but Harrier Gillain, Knight-Mage.

For a brief disorienting moment the world wasn't his normal world of shapes and colors, sounds and scents, but a flat and silent world made up of simple glowing lines. Lines of attack. Lines of defense. Lines of advance. It stretched into past and future—*here* that which has happened—*here* that which shall be—showing him things he couldn't possibly see.

Here the enemy. Here the ally.

And then—between one footstep and the next—the otherworldly image was gone and the world was simply the world again. But Harrier knew there was no threat, no ambush, anywhere around him, even concealed in the tents on either side. Automatically his hand went to the sash at his waist, and the reassuring lump of the Three Books folded into the fabric there. While it was nice to know he wasn't about to have to fight for his life, if this was the Wild Magic's idea of a way to reassure him, all Harrier had to say was that he wasn't particularly reassured.

"Welcome, Wildmage from the Great Cold! You do the tents of the Tabingana great honor," Ogmazad said. "Be certain that we are eager to hear all you have to tell."

"Thank you," Harrier said. He stopped at the edge of the carpet. Shaiara shoved him forward until he stepped onto it. "Ah, *Ummara* Shaiara tells me I'm not very good at making speeches. And I'm not. But there are things you need to know."

"And who but a Blue Robe should come to tell them to us?" Ogmazad said, continuing to smile. "We will be grateful to hear any news you have for us. We feared that you and your brethren were all dead—for is not the Cold North the stronghold of the False Balance?"

Harrier had barely opened his mouth to reply—though he had no idea what he could say that would be even marginally polite—when Ogmazad interrupted himself to say that of course Harrier would not wish to share his news until the *kaffeyah* had brewed.

"You must talk about the water first," Ciniran whispered in his ear as he and Shaiara moved forward to seat themselves upon the carpet. "The water is the most important thing."

Ciniran didn't sit down with the two of them, but stepped back to stand in the shade of a nearby tent. Harrier nodded distractedly, only half listening. He supposed the Isvaieni would think that water was more important than Demons. Then suddenly he thought of something that made him think Ciniran was right.

If the lake hadn't been there two days ago, who was to say it would be there two days from now?

Their arrival had obviously been a signal, for even before the two of them were seated, people began to appear from the other tents, moving toward Ogmazad's tent with a kind of purposeful idleness, and soon there were at least three dozen Isvaieni seated upon the carpet, and a crowd of spectators standing behind them.

Shaiara was the youngest person in the gathering of *Ummarai* and *chaharums*, but there were one or two who didn't look much older. Most of the people here looked as if they were probably around the age of his parents. Less than a quarter of them looked as old as Liapha. A third of the group were women.

At least I know that none of these people rode with Zanattar, Harrier thought to himself. It was his only consolation.

The *kaffeyah*, when it was ready, was poured into tiny cups only large enough to hold a single sip. The cups were placed on trays, and the trays were passed, each person taking a cup, draining it, and upending it upon the tray. As the trays made their way through the seated audience, the mood grew more expectant. At last all the trays were returned. Harrier didn't need anyone to tell him that the formalities were over. He took a deep breath. He really hated speaking in public.

"My name is Harrier Gillain," he said firmly. *Better to start with simple facts*, he told himself. "I was born in Armethalieh. Several moonturns ago a unicorn named Kareta brought me the Three Books and told me I was going to become a Knight-Mage. I got here—"

"Only a Demon would dare to mock the *Tale of Kellen* so!" Zanattar pushed his way through to the front of the standing spectators and glared toward Harrier. "Where is Bisochim? Gone—and no man may say where! For sennights the tale has been in my mouth, told to any who wish to hear: at Tamatha'Iteru, Demons

defended the city, and when through the power of the True Balance I and my army captured them—”

“Bisochim has gone to the Veiled Lands,” Harrier snapped. He stood up. He had no intention of staying seated while Zanattar towered over him. “He called Saravasse—that’s his dragon’s name, if you care—and went to the Veiled Lands with Tiercel—that’s my friend’s name—to ask the Elves for help.”

“To slay the Demon!” Zanattar mocked.

“No,” Harrier said. He took a deep breath, reining in his temper with an effort. There was more at stake here than just who was right. The Isvaieni who’d followed Zanattar when he’d led them as an army would probably be just as willing to follow him now. Zanattar wouldn’t have to do much to become not just the only *Ummara* the Isvaieni had, but their King. “Bisochim is flying him there on Saravasse. Tiercel is the one who’s going to ask the Elves for help, since Vairindiel Elvenqueen knows that he’s the chosen Champion of the Light.” No matter how many times he said it, it still sounded ridiculous.

“Lies,” Zanattar said again.

“Look, you were *there* yesterday when Bisochim said that neither Tyr or I was a Demon. So were a bunch of other people. Either Bisochim told you the truth yesterday, or he’s been lying to you all along. Which is it?” Harrier said.

Many of the spectators began to whisper to each other excitedly, passing his words back through the crowd. It was getting larger. Zanattar simply glared, and Harrier could sense the confrontation he didn’t want to have coming closer, as inevitable as the collision of a storm-driven ship with a reef.

“This is the Time of the Breaking of Tribes, and all the young hunters are sworn to hold each other as their blood kin, a tie above the ties of family or tribe. I do not believe that your words hold wisdom for the Isvaieni. If they did, then surely Bisochim would be here to say so,” Zanattar said scornfully. He smiled triumphantly at Harrier, certain of his victory.

Harrier looked away from Zanattar, down at the *Ummarai* and the *chaharums* still seated on Ogmazad’s carpet. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Not with Zanattar intending to stand here and shout him down every time he opened his mouth.

“All right,” Harrier said quietly. “I’m done. I’m leaving. Maybe you’ll all still be alive when Bisochim gets back. I doubt it. You see, the only water here is that lake up there, and that could vanish tomorrow. But that’s not your actual problem. There really is a Demon loose. Tiercel and I were sent to stop her. But we got here too late. She’s free. The rain yesterday was Bisochim protecting you from her. If you’re really lucky, she won’t come back and kill all of you.” He looked down at Ogmazad. “Thank you for your hospitality. I guess there really isn’t anything else to say. I hope things work out for you.”

“But . . . have you not come to tell us how to fight the False Balance?” Ogmazad asked, sounding bewildered.

“Don’t any of you *get it yet?* There *is* no False Balance!” Harrier cried. “There’s only the Balance! And a Demon! She lied to Bisochim and Bisochim lied to you! *Bisochim lied to you!* And because of that, *you*, Zanattar—and everyone who followed you—murdered thousands of innocent people! Because of Ahairan! And now, an army *is* going to come down from the North. Not because they’re evil! They’re going to come because you killed—”

“The Shadow-Touched lies!” Zanattar roared, drowning out the rest of what Harrier had to say. “At Tarnatha’Iteru, we—”

“At Tarnatha’Iteru you *survived* because Tiercel didn’t kill you!” Harrier shouted back. “He didn’t think it was fair to use magic against you! He knew you’d been lied to!” He locked eyes with Zanattar. He couldn’t remember another time in his life when he’d been this angry and hadn’t hit something. “I wish he’d killed you. All of you. Maybe then everyone here who hadn’t been with you would get the chance to live. Maybe I could convince them that there’s no False Balance, no True Balance, just the same Balance there ever was. And you know, everybody keeps talking about what the Wild Magic *wants*, and how it’s going to take *care* of them, and being a Wildmage really sucks sometimes, because I actually know that the Wild Magic doesn’t care about me, Zanattar, and it doesn’t care about you, and I’m not really sure what it *does* care about—except that I know that whatever it *does* care about, it’s big, and it’s *good*. I serve the Wild Magic, and I’ll die for it, and I hope by the Light that you can say the same thing about whatever you believe in, because for an entire year my best friend and I have been trying to get here before the Dark got loose. And we failed. And it’s loose. And Tyr is still trying to stop it, and I hope he can, because I have no idea how to. Not *one*. And if Ahairan decides to come back here before Tyr and Bisochim get back with help you are all going to die. And I’m not staying here to argue with you about whether I’m a Demon or not. Get out of my way.”

When he’d started speaking, he’d been furious. By the time he finished, Harrier was just tired. There wasn’t a passageway between the bodies of the men and women sitting on Ogmazad’s carpet, but he stepped carefully over and between them. The ring of spectators backed away to let him pass.

“Blue Robe! Where will you go?” Ogmazad called after him.

“Home,” Harrier said. He pushed his way through the Isvaieni in front of him. The onlookers shuffled and sidled away from him, giving him space to push his way clear of the crowd.

Seven



Dark Deception

TIERCEL GRIPPED BISOCHIM'S sash tightly as Saravasse began her long galloping takeoff run. Almost too quickly, she crouched and sprang, spreading her wings for the series of stomach-turning swoops and spirals that would carry her up into the sky. All of Tiercel's earlier calm was gone, and he was only grateful that everything had happened so fast that he hadn't had time to show Harrier just how scared he was. It was one thing to tell Harrier that Bisochim had just been tricked by the Dark when Tiercel's whole knowledge of the Dark came from a collection of ancient histories written about ancient wars and some visions—that were terrifying but still only visions—and another thing when he actually saw the price of dealing with a Demon. Of gazing on its face, of working its spells of twisted magic year after year . . .

He couldn't imagine having anything happen to him that could make him treat Ancaladar the way Bisochim was treating Saravasse, or that could make Ancaladar react to him the way Saravasse was reacting to Bisochim. But no. That wasn't true. Tiercel *could* imagine it. He'd just managed to convince himself that nothing like that had happened to Bisochim. But what if it had? He'd placed himself at Bisochim's mercy. By the time Saravasse reached a height where she could glide instead of having to flap her wings constantly, they were already out of sight of Telinchechitl. If Bisochim chose to, he could fling Tiercel to his death and Harrier would never know. And even at that, imagining that Bisochim might kill him because Ahairan had driven him mad was better than thinking that Bisochim had figured out some way to fool the Wild Magic into thinking that he wasn't Shadow-Touched when he was.

When Tiercel had ridden on Ancaladar's back, the altitude at which they flew had never bothered him. Now all of Tiercel's childhood fear of heights came rushing back more potent than before. He realized that he had his eyes tightly closed, flinching in terror each time Saravasse's body sank from beneath him in the rise and fall of her flight. The fact that he *wasn't* falling, that he was clutching Bisochim's robes so tightly that if he fell, Bisochim would fall with him, was small comfort.

"Strange, that one of the Bonded should fear the sky."

Tiercel could barely make out the sound of Bisochim's words above the whistling of the wind. He was shivering with cold as much as with fear: they were high enough now that the heat of the Barahileth was no more than a distant memory. "Flying with someone else is different," he forced himself to say.

"If I sought your life, I would have ended it long since," Bisochim said. "I do not make war on children." His voice was harsh, filled with self-loathing, and it startled Tiercel enough that he blinked his eyes open, wondering what he could possibly say in reply.

Suddenly Saravasse slewed sideways through the air. "Fool of a dragon!" Bisochim shouted.

Tiercel slid sideways on Saravasse's neck as she shot skyward. Bisochim twisted around, grabbing him before he could fall. When Saravasse banked again, Tiercel was ready for it—this time he had his arms wrapped tightly around Bisochim's waist.

He wasn't ready for what he saw.

There was another rider in the sky. For an instant, Tiercel felt a pang of relief. *The Elves already know what's happened. They've sent help.*

Then Saravasse went into another of her desperate escape maneuvers, and Tiercel realized uneasily that the other creature in the sky wasn't a dragon. It was large and winged, and there the similarity ended. Instead of a dragon's long graceful neck, its body simply seemed to stop, and a pair of enormous arms ending in cruel pincerlike claws grew from its massive shoulders. Three pairs of spindly legs dangled beneath its body, and instead of the tapering whiplike flanged tail of the dragon—used for stabilizing its flight—it possessed a curved clublike tail with a wicked barb at the tip. The hideous thing resembled nothing so much as a giant bat-winged *jarrari*. Poised upon its back was a scarlet-robed figure. It was too distant for Tiercel to make out any of the details about the rider beyond the color of the robes, but Bisochim recognized her.

"*Ahairan*," he said, his voice filled with hate.

If Tiercel had been afraid before, he was terrified now. Ahairan—the Fire Woman—the Demon—the creature he'd hoped to defeat by preventing her summons into the world. And now that she was here—and Ancaladar was gone—every single half-formed plan he'd ever made seemed *incredibly stupid*—

"She won't be able to pass Pelashia's Veil!" Tiercel shouted up to Bisochim. *I hope.*

They were still somewhere over the Isvai. Glancing away from Ahairan for an instant, Tiercel could see dune-shadows and the gray of rock on the desert below. *Far below.*

Saravasse had obviously made up her mind to flee to the Veiled Lands before either Tiercel or Bisochim had spotted Ahairan. Though she wasn't his Bonded, Tiercel could almost feel Saravasse strain as she sought to outrun Ahairan's winged mount and gain altitude. But whatever that creature was, it was faster. In a few more seconds, it would be close enough to attack them.

Moonturn after moonturn, Ancaladar had drilled Tiercel in spells of shielding and protection for a battle such as this. Shield and MageShield, Guard, Transmutation (to water, to rock, even to air), Discovery, Invisibility . . . and a few, a very few, spells of attack. Lightning. Cold. Even the uses of Fire, for Fire could be a weapon. Tiercel had known only a few spells out of the thousands that a true High Mage in the Age of Mages would have known, but he'd known them well. Ancaladar had trained him for one purpose: to find the creature in his visions, or the one who meant to summon her, and to get close enough to it to do what he needed to do.

Now his ability to wield the spells he knew was gone. And Bisochim had received no such training. Bisochim was Tiercel's equal in power, and possessed infinitely more experience, but Bisochim had never expected to have to fight Demons.

"You have to do something!" Tiercel shouted in Bisochim's ear. MageShield would protect them—only no Wildmage could cast it.

"The Sandwind will not reach so high!" Bisochim shouted back.

Tiercel knew that the High Magick and the Wild Magic didn't have the same spells to call. He wracked his brain for everything he'd ever heard Harrier say about the Three Books. "Lightning!" Tiercel shouted.

And suddenly there was lightning, but it wasn't Bisochim who'd summoned it. Saravasse dodged sideways through the sizzling reek of burning air, falling hundreds of feet in seconds. She screamed out a challenge—the first time Tiercel had heard her voice—as she attempted to regain lost height, but it was too late. The Darkspawn

creature was upon her.

Now—at last—it was Bisochim who summoned Lightning, and half-a-dozen coruscating bolts hissed down out of the cloudless sky, striking the desert all around them, but Tiercel didn't need to hear Bisochim's muttered curse to know that the *jarrari*-thing had evaded all of them. And the fact that Bisochim was casting spells of the Wild Magic so close to him was having its usual effect: Tiercel was suddenly so ill that it was all he could do to cling to Bisochim as Saravasse desperately attempted to do something—anything—to escape.

Bisochim continued to attack as Saravasse was forced closer and closer to the ground. Tiercel sensed a blast of heat, one of cold, more bright flash-cracks of lightning, and the scent of burned air. He couldn't tell whether they were Bisochim's spells, or Ahairan's. All he knew was that he'd never felt this sick in his life. Suddenly the sound of a woman's laughter made Tiercel force his eyes open. What he saw made him forget his physical anguish entirely. The bat-winged creature was flying right toward them. It was barely a dozen feet away.

For a timeless moment Tiercel stared into Ahairan's eyes. The world of his visions and the real world became one. Her hair streamed out behind her—not fire-pale as he had dreamed it, but dark like banked coals, with flashes of red. Her skin was the color of pale honey, and her teeth were as white as a cat's. Her eyes were the bright gold of a bird's. As vividly *real* as she was, Ahairan shouldn't have had the power to terrify him the way his visions had. But as he stared at her, all Tiercel could think of was getting *away*, even if it meant leaping from Saravasse's back to his death.

Before he could act on that impulse, Saravasse did the only thing she could do to evade a head-on collision. She twisted herself in mid air and *rolled*, so that for a few heartbeats she would fly upside down, and Ahairan and her winged *jarrari*-thing would pass above her.

But Saravasse wore no saddle to keep her riders with her no matter what aerial acrobatics she performed. As soon as she rolled, Bisochim and Tiercel began to slip from her back. Saravasse twisted upright again immediately to keep them from falling, but she was too close to her enemy as she did, and the bat-winged creature pivoted in the air and grabbed her wing in its pincers. She turned her head and struck at it, but she was too slow.

Tiercel heard a loud pop and a crackling, like the sounds of a campfire made with green wood. For a moment he wondered—dazed with terror—how he could be hearing those sounds here and now. Then Saravasse screamed, lurched sideways in the air, and began to fall. The bat-winged creature had released Saravasse immediately. It didn't attack her again. It didn't need to. She was still high above the desert floor.

Tiercel stared in horror at the fluttering ruin of her right wing. All that was left were trailing scraps of membrane. Most of the long ribs had been broken or sheared away. Saravasse keened in agony as she desperately beat her good wing. The shattered remains of the other one clicked and fluttered as she thrashed it reflexively, but it was useless. He clutched at Bisochim, wondering if he had the courage to simply jump.

The horizon spun around them as Saravasse fell, and he glimpsed Ahairan hovering above them. Waiting.



THE next thing Tiercel was aware of was heat and pain. He tried to move, and was rewarded with lancing pain . . . *everywhere*. He tried to open his eyes, and couldn't. He began to struggle, panicking.

"Do not move." He felt a hand on his forehead, and the pain vanished. Only then did he realize it had been Bisochim's voice that he'd heard.

"Alive," he croaked.

"Barely." Bisochim's voice was grim. "Had we not fallen into soft sand, you would not be. Lie still, and let me Heal you."

"No, I—" Tiercel wanted to protest, to explain about the shields Ancaladar had taught him to keep around himself at all times—so simple and so basic that they didn't require any power outside what he naturally possessed to keep them in place—but Bisochim had already begun to work.

Tiercel wasn't sure whether Bisochim dismantled his shields, or simply blasted through them. All he knew was that suddenly the pain he'd felt before was back, and this time it grew until all he could do was scream in protest and struggle against the strong hands holding him down. Then suddenly the pain was gone. He felt a tingling rush of *something* cascade through his body, a sensation that he could only describe as "warmth." When it had ebbed, he drew a deep breath, and rolled to his side, coughing and gagging.

"There should no longer be injury," Bisochim said anxiously. "I will—"

"No!" Tiercel croaked. His throat was raw from screaming and he was desperately thirsty. "I'm a High Mage. The Wild Magic makes me sick."

It probably wasn't the best way of putting it, not when they'd just almost been killed by a Demon, but he was nauseated, and exhausted, and weak. Being Healed had actually hurt worse than falling out of the sky had. Ancaladar had helped him put up his magical shields, and Bisochim had just smashed through them, and Tiercel didn't think he could manage to put them back again by himself. It probably didn't matter, since he wasn't really a High Mage anymore, but it felt as if Bisochim had destroyed the last of Ancaladar that Tiercel had.

"The time of the High Mages is ended," Bisochim said.

Tiercel forced himself into a sitting position. That gave him a pounding headache and a new wave of dizziness in addition to feeling sick. "I'm the first one in a long time," he said. Talking made his throat ache, and he coughed, and that made everything hurt more. He raised his hands to his face. There was blood there, still wet, and he wiped it away. After a few tries, he got his eyes open far enough to take a good look at Bisochim. The Isvaieni was disheveled and his robes were bloody, but he must have Healed himself before coming to Tiercel's aid, because Tiercel couldn't see any wounds.

"When I recovered my senses, Ahairan and the Balwarta were gone," Bisochim said, when he saw he had Tiercel's attention. "I know not why she did not choose to claim our lives. Perhaps she thought us dead. But her folly is our fortune, for now I shall Heal my Bonded, and we shall continue on our mission."

He rose to his feet, dusting the sand from his robes. A few yards away, Tiercel could see Saravasse sprawled out awkwardly on the sand. She looked as if she'd hit a dune when she'd fallen—saving her life—and the two of them had been flung free, hitting another—and saving theirs.

Tiercel frowned. Ahairan *had* to know that the fall hadn't killed Bisochim. Saravasse was hard to miss, and a dragon vanished at the death of its Bonded. Ahairan might trust the desert to kill *him*—but only if the other two were dead. He wasn't sure which of them she'd been after, but if she'd meant to kill *either* of them, she had to know she'd failed. He got carefully to his feet, staring at Bisochim as he walked slowly across the sand toward Saravasse. *Since the very beginning of my visions, Ahairan has been asking Bisochim to come to her, and he hasn't. Now what . . . ?*

"No!" he shouted, just as Bisochim reached Saravasse and placed his hands upon her shoulder. His shout mingled with hers.

Bisochim recoiled in shock—as much from the sudden movement of Saravasse's head as the sound of her voice. Tiercel ran to him, staggering and stumbling through the shifting sand. He grabbed Bisochim's arm. "No," he repeated, more quietly. "You can't."

"I will Heal my Bonded," Bisochim repeated, his mouth drawn into a thin line of determination.

"You can't," Tiercel said again. He knew he didn't have the words to explain. He only knew that something would go horribly wrong if Bisochim did, and he knew that Bisochim didn't trust him enough to take him at his word.

"You mustn't. Beloved, the child speaks the truth."

It was hard to say whether Tiercel or Bisochim was more shocked at hearing her words. The scarlet dragon had raised her head from the sand to shout her warning.

Now she lowered it until it was on a level with theirs.

“Saravasse,” Bisochim said hoarsely. “Beloved. I must Heal you so that you can fly again. Just as I did so long ago—do you remember?”

On the plains of Telinchechitl Bisochim had spoken to his dragon with so much anger and contempt that he’d made Tiercel think that Ahairan had driven him insane. Now there was nothing in his voice but love and grief—and so much longing that it made Tiercel wish he could be anywhere that he didn’t have to hear it.

“I remember,” the dragon said softly, and the misery in her voice matched his. “But it cannot be. Oh, would that Tannetarie the White and Ancaladar the Black had spared me this day—I have become your dearest enemy through no wish of my own!”

“You could never—” Bisochim began.

“But I have,” Saravasse interrupted him. “The Spirit of Darkness has willed it so. Draw upon my magic as much as you choose and no harm will come to you. But any spell cast upon me will open a window into your spirit that will make you Ahairan’s plaything, to do with as she wills. You must leave me as I am, Beloved.”

Bisochim sank to his knees in the sand beside her, moaning aloud in despair. Saravasse lowered her head further, resting it on the sand beside him. He bent over her, wrapping his arms around her head, and Tiercel turned away. He couldn’t bear to see any more.

“This is how we began, is it not, my love?” he heard Saravasse say. “And this is how we will end. I am grateful beyond measure that you have returned to me, for my heart was lonely beyond the telling all these long years.”

Tiercel staggered away. He didn’t know where he was going. He didn’t care. Just . . . away.



HARRIER still thought that the blue robes the southern Wildmages wore were stupid and a bad idea. The whole idea of being a Wildmage was to serve the Wild Magic in secret. That was what he’d been taught by the Preceptors of the Light, and now that he was a Wildmage himself it seemed like an even better idea. But at least the blue robes he was wearing meant that nobody stopped him as he strode through the camp. After a few minutes’ walk, he reached the orchard. It was the only place other than an Isvaieni tent that he’d been able to think of that might offer any protection from the sun.

It was cooler under the trees, but Harrier could see that their leaves were already beginning to wilt, and when he located a patch of shade and sat down in it, the grass crackled dryly beneath him. The canals between the trees that had been filled with water the day before weren’t just empty, but dry. He leaned his head back against the tree trunk and stared up at the hot white sky. It was wrong that there should be green leaves (even wilted ones) against a sky that color. Its brightness made his eyes hurt.

Aside from a few dogs and chickens, Harrier was alone. He was surprised at how much of a relief it was. And then he wondered what he was going to do now.

Home. He’d told Ogmazad that was where he was going. He only wished it was possible. He’d never wanted to go home so much in his life. Was Armethalieh still there at all? Or had Ahairan gone to Armethalieh after she’d escaped? If she had, what was she doing? Were his family and friends all right? He had no way of knowing—and no way of finding out, either. From what he’d been able to piece together between talking to Shaiara and the experience of their journey here, it was maybe three sennights from Telinchechitl to a place called Kannatha Well. Kannatha Well was near the southernmost edge of the Isvai. It was another moonturn from Akazidas’Iteru—at the northernmost edge of the Isvai—to Armethalieh.

And Light Alone only knew how much Isvai there was between Kannatha Well and Akazidas’Iteru.

It would be really convenient if Tiercel showed up right about now. Harrier sighed bitterly, knowing how unlikely that was. Tiercel had probably barely even arrived at Karahelanderialigor, let alone started explaining what he’d come for. Assuming he’d gotten there at all. Harrier didn’t want to think about the worst things that could happen, but he couldn’t help it. Bisochim wasn’t Shadow-Touched, but bad things happened all the time without Demons or the Dark around—look at Zanattar and everything *he’d* done, just to begin with.

You know what Da says about borrowing trouble, he told himself firmly. *There’s no need to when the world gives so much of it away free. Besides, you know that Tyr can talk practically anybody into or out of anything, and it can’t be more than an hour or two at most to Karahelanderialigor. He can keep Bisochim from doing anything . . . crazy . . . for a couple of hours. Then they’ll be safe on the ground.* Harrier was mostly convinced of that, but it only left his mind free to worry about the other half of the problem, and his doubts there were harder to talk himself out of.

What if the Elves refused to help?

Harrier didn’t really understand why the Elves hadn’t been willing to do more in the first place. Idalia and Jermayan had said it was because they were afraid of Tiercel making the wrong choices, so they’d told him nothing and given him nothing beyond the power to cast the spells of the High Magick. And Ancaladar had been more to both Tiercel and Harrier than just a power source for Tiercel’s spells, but now Ancaladar was gone. And Harrier wasn’t completely certain that the Elves wouldn’t put asking for the help of Elven Mages to trap Ahairan into the same category as fighting the Dark themselves.

No. They can’t. Not when the Dark is already back.

But Harrier had spent just long enough in the Elven Lands to know that he’d have to live as long as an Elf to understand how their minds worked. They might say “no”—or they might offer Tiercel a form of help that Tiercel would never take. They might offer Tiercel another Dragonbond. Harrier shook his head in frustration. He couldn’t bring himself to believe Tiercel would accept, no matter how desperate their need—and how could he, when Ancaladar wasn’t dead? Kareta had seemed certain of that much. And Harrier had paid a high enough price for the information.

Only you haven’t paid it yet.

Ever since this had started, Harrier had kept trying to get used to the idea that the world was a place he couldn’t influence and couldn’t control, and all that seemed to happen was that the more control he gave up, the more was taken away. He’d gone from being Tiercel’s companion on their journey to his follower on their desperate quest, and now he wasn’t even that. And along the way, he’d given up charge over his own life to the Wild Magic. All the wondertales talked about Wildmages having great power, as if that meant Wildmages were people like Chief Magistrate Vaunnel, or Vairindiel Elvenqueen, or even his Da, people who got to give orders and have things turn out the way they wanted them to, and being a Wildmage wasn’t anything like that at all. It didn’t mean having *more* power as much as it meant having *different* power. And maybe, depending on what you’d started out with, *less* power. And as for control, well, as far as he could tell, you didn’t have any of that at all. Not over what you were going to be doing tomorrow, or where you were going to be. “All goes as the Wild Magic wills,” Harrier muttered in disgust. He closed his eyes against the brightness of the day. *That much, at least, he had control over.*



ABOUT a chime later, Harrier realized he was about to have company. Even with his eyes closed, he could tell that someone was approaching, just as he knew exactly how long he’d been sitting here doing not-much. More of the so-far-useless Special Knight-Mage Gifts, he guessed. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised—and a little wary—to see that it was Zanattar who was walking toward him through the orchard.

Zanattar was alone, but he was also armed. He hadn’t been armed back at Ogmazad’s tent—no one had. But now he was wearing not only his *geschak*, but his *awardan*. He stopped about ten feet away from Harrier, staring down at him. “I am a blooded warrior, proven in battle,” Zanattar said.

“Go away,” Harrier answered.

“You have claimed for yourself the mantle of Knight-Mage, that which the Wild Magic bestowed upon Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy in the darkest hour the world has yet known. If you are indeed that which you claim to be, you may prove it now by slaying me in fair battle. Do this, and all who call me ‘brother’ will follow you,” Zanattar continued, ignoring Harrier’s interruption.

Harrier stared at Zanattar for several seconds. All the things he could immediately think of to say—*Excuse me, I thought you’d been at Tarnatha’Iteru*—and—*Oh, just what I want, a collection of murdering Isvaieni for brothers*—seemed much too flippant as responses to a man who’d just challenged him to a duel to the death.

“Yeah,” Harrier said at last. “No. I don’t have to prove anything to you. I really don’t like you. I don’t like you a whole lot, actually, but I don’t ever want to kill anyone ever again. Maybe killing people doesn’t bother you—” He bit his lip. He would never—*never!*—forget the first man he’d killed the day Zanattar’s army had taken the city. It seemed horrible that he didn’t know his name. Just as horrible as the fact that he couldn’t clearly remember the others he’d killed at all.

Zanattar stared down at him for a long moment, his sun-darkened face expressionless. “Once I thought I would live out the compass of my years without knowing what it was to let another’s life from his body by the strength of my own hand. And then the day came when Luranda showed me the body of the Blue Robe buried beneath the sand, and I believed all that Bisochim had told us, and I believed our great enemies had slain those who meant no man harm. And now you have come to tell us that there has been no enemy save Bisochim—that it was he who slew the other Blue Robes, he who has fed us all upon the meat of lies until we have all choked upon it.”

“And you don’t want to believe me. And you’re afraid you do. Too bad,” Harrier said unfeelingly, still not moving from where he sat. “Bisochim summoned a Demon, and to get here it tricked him and lied to him. Bisochim tricked you and lied to you, too. But no matter how many lies you were told, some of the things you did were still your own choices. So if you think I’m going to forgive you—or anyone—I’m not. But all of that doesn’t matter as much as it should right now, because there’s a Demon loose.”

“But Bisochim will slay this Demon, will he not?” Zanattar asked, and even now there was hope in the Isvaieni’s voice.

“No,” Harrier said flatly. “He can’t.” He was tired and angry and he didn’t see why Zanattar shouldn’t know the truth, especially now that he seemed willing to believe it. “Bisochim is a Dragonbond Wildmage. He’s probably the most powerful Mage I’ve ever seen—and as a matter of fact, Zanattar, and I know you won’t believe me, I’ve *met* Jermayan Dragon-Rider. Bisochim doesn’t have enough magic—or the right *kind* of magic—to kill Ahairan. Tiercel’s hoping that the Elven Mages will be able to find and imprison Ahairan until the right kind of Mages to kill her can be born and trained. If they can’t do that, we’re all going to die.”

“And so we must go back to the Isvai now. Because Telinchechitl is cursed. And because there are no Armies of the False Balance seeking us at all,” Zanattar said.

It gave Harrier a mean-spirited satisfaction to see the fear and dawning realization on Zanattar’s face. He sighed. Ahairan wasn’t Zanattar’s fault, no matter what else was. “The reason you have to go back to the Isvai is because this place is drying up. And because if Ahairan comes back here, you don’t have any place to run to. And when First Magistrate Vaunnel’s army gets to the Madiran—and believe me, one’s coming—we’d *all* better hope that Ahairan isn’t leading it.”

He could see from the sudden look of stunned realization on Zanattar’s face that this idea hadn’t even occurred to him. Harrier had been thinking of nothing else from the moment he’d realized that Ahairan was *here*.

“And if she is?” Zanattar asked. The man looked truly frightened now. At least if he’d thought that the wrong people were Demons, he’d believed that Demons were loose in the world for longer than Harrier had.

“Then I suppose you should give thanks to the Wild Magic that you’ve learned to fight,” Harrier answered. It was the truth, but he still couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“Wildmage—Knight-Mage—if it is as you say, we cannot do this thing alone.” Zanattar sank to his knees in the dry grass. His hands rested—open, palm up—upon his knees. “Do not forsake the Isvaieni. We need the counsel of the Wild Magic now more than ever. I, Zanattar, beg this of you. If my death—” He lifted one hand, reaching for his *geschak*.

“For the Eternal Light’s sake, Zanattar, haven’t enough people died?” Harrier snarled, thrusting himself to his feet. He glared down at Zanattar, breathing hard. “Is that all you can think of to do? Forever? Just kill and kill and kill? I—” He wanted to explain, to persuade, to *beat Zanattar senseless*. “It’s stupid,” he finished quietly.

“Lead us,” Zanattar urged, not moving. “As Great Kellen led the great armies of old.”

Harrier flexed his hands, trying to keep them from turning into fists. It was a long time before he could manage to answer. “I am not Kellen,” he said through gritted teeth. “And your people are not an army. But I’ll ride with you back to the Isvai. You just . . . stop killing people. Stop.”

Slowly Zanattar got to his feet. He looked as if he wasn’t actually happy to be alive, and he still looked frightened. He half-nodded, and gestured in the direction of the tents, and edged away—until he could turn and walk away—without another word.

Harrier sighed, and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes. His head hurt, and now he was thirsty, and he didn’t particularly want to go walking several miles back to the lake in the middle of the day in search of water. He sat back down at the base of the tree and hoped nobody else would come to talk to him.



FOR most of another hour Harrier stayed where he was, but after that, the sounds from the camp became too much to ignore. If they’d sounded like trouble, he would have investigated immediately. But they only sounded . . . noisy. When he finally got to his feet and started walking slowly back in the direction of the camp, he saw no change at first. Every tent was still in its place, just as it had been when he’d left. But the space around them looked barren somehow, and after a moment he identified the reason. Where there’d been carpets unfurled beneath outstretched awnings, and clutters of pots and baskets near burnt-over spaces used for cooking, now the grass was bare. He stopped in the doorway of the nearest tent, where a dozen people were carefully rolling up the rugs that had covered the floor. One of them—a woman—glanced up and saw him.

“It shall be as you have counseled, Harrier. When the moon rises into the sky, the Adanate shall be prepared to go forth from this place.”

“Just the Adanate?” From the preparations all around him, it looked as if all the tribes were getting ready to move, but it didn’t hurt to be sure.

The woman shook her head. “The *Ummarai* have spoken, and their *chaharums* have carried their word to every tent. The Isvaieni go from Telinchechitl. The Kadyastar, the Barantar, and the Kamazan depart tonight.”

“That’s great.” Harrier turned and walked away. He could not imagine how these people were going to pack up several hundred tents and get ready to go *anywhere* in half a day—and if they tried, the heat would probably kill them.



HARRIER hadn’t thought anybody could be ready to go in less than a day, but just as the Isvaieni woman had said, the Kadyastar, the Barantar, and the Kamazan were ready to leave Telinchechitl by nightfall. Harrier, Shaiara, and Ciniran were going with them. Harrier had been surprised to discover that Shaiara now had not only a tent, but everything that went with it, since he’d had it drummed into his head over and over that there was no charity given among the Isvaieni. But Shaiara could

choose to accept what Liapha wished to give her in Ganima's name, and no matter what she thought of her grandmother, Shaiara was pragmatic enough to know that they needed supplies to cross the desert. Ganima's long-unpaid bride-price was now a tent and supplies and extra *shotors* to add to the four they'd arrived with. Liapha had offered Shaiara Kadyastar saddles and bridles for her *shotors* as well. Shaiara had refused.



THE swirl of departure that evening reminded Harrier of the noisy chaos of the Armethaliehan docks. Globes of Coldfire—his contribution—hovered over the *shotors* like Flowering Fair lanterns. Children too young to understand the seriousness of the situation ran back and forth, squealing and playing tag. In the caravan-line, *shotors* grunted and moaned as they were loaded. Saddle and bridle bells chimed and clacked.

No matter how much Harrier had heard today about the "Breaking of Tribes," it didn't seem to matter much to the Isvaieni now that they were leaving Telinchechitl; they were sorting themselves out into tribes again for the caravan. Caravans, actually, because there were going to be several of them, spaced out over most of a sennight. When Bisochim had led the Isvaieni into the Barahileth, he'd created enormous oases of water at each halt, but Harrier couldn't do that. In order to make use of the wells along the Dove Road, the tribes would have to make the journey back to the Isvai in small groups, and even so, the journey would be a grueling one. Many of the animals here would be slaughtered before they left, the meat preserved as food for the journey.

The Kadyastar were traveling in the first group to leave—at least partly so Liapha could go on annoying Shaiara, Harrier suspected—and the Lanzanur weren't going in the same group as the Kadyastar, because apparently *Ummara* Kataduk and *Ummara* Liapha just didn't get along. That was fine with Harrier, because it meant he wouldn't have to see Zanattar again until they got back to the Isvai, at least if Harrier was lucky. And if Harrier was *very* lucky, he wouldn't have to see him again at all. Once Tiercel got back here with a dozen Elven Mages . . .

Maybe by tomorrow, Harrier thought hopefully. *Then all of this will be someone else's problem.*

Shaiara frowned and glanced up at the sky. "Fools," she said crossly. "Do they think that the sun will wait upon their pleasure? We must go *now*."

"It's only half a night to the first well," Harrier said. *I hope so, anyway.* He also hoped there was water in it when they got there. He remembered now that the ground had shook yesterday while he was herding goats at the demand of the Wild Magic. He thought that might be why all the fountains had gone dry. He hoped the wells hadn't gone dry too.

"Huh," Shaiara said dismissively. "When we reach Abi'Abadshar, Ciniran and I shall go aside and bring the Nalzindar to the road so that we may all return to the Isvai," she added quietly. "Fear not for yourself, Harrier. The wearer of the Blue Robe can seek food and a bed in any tent. It is no charity to shelter one who speaks for the Wild Magic."

Harrier glanced toward Ciniran, but she was making a last check of their animals and equipment. He wasn't sure whether she hadn't heard Shaiara, or was just being tactful and arranging to be somewhere else while Shaiara told him her plan. He shook his head. He knew that Shaiara could take care of herself a lot better than he could take care of *himself*, but . . . "I'd feel a lot better if I went with you to Abi'Abadshar, Shaiara." *Just in case Ahairan shows up somewhere she shouldn't. Because what's to stop her from following you and Ciniran to Abi'Abadshar no matter how well it's hidden behind spells, just the way Tiercel and I followed the Dove Road to Telinchechitl?* He looked skyward uneasily. If Ahairan came here . . .

Shaiara wrinkled her nose in dismissal. "Your place is with the people," she said, as if it was self-evident. "Should the wells upon the Dove Road fail before Bisochim returns, all will die. Nor is Kannatha Well great enough to succor us at the end of our journey." Harrier's face must have showed his shock, for she reached out and covered his hand with hers. Her clasp was strong and warm. "All will be well. You can call water to a dry well. I know this. There is not one among us down to the least suckling babe who will not share the MagePrice."

Harrier took a deep breath. *Twenty days to the Isvai. Almost three sennights. Bisochim will be back by then, or Tiercel will come with a bunch of Elven Mages. I don't have to figure out how to do those things. I won't have to figure out how to do those things.* "Yeah," he said aloud. "Okay. Fine."

"Hah," Shaiara said in triumph as the *shotor* ahead of them surged to its feet. The bells and tassels on its bridle clinked and swayed. From her perch upon its back Liapha gazed around herself, looking pleased.

Shaiara seated herself upon her own *shotor's* back and tapped it upon its shoulder. It rose gracefully to its feet—in silence. Harrier settled himself into his own saddle, and Lightfoot grunted and rose to her feet as well. Slowly the first segment of the long caravan began moving into the night.

And once again Harrier stopped himself from looking skyward.

If Ahairan returned, there was nothing he could do.



TIERCEL hadn't realized how quiet the open desert could be. There was nothing around him but cream-white sand and blue-white sky and wind. The sand beneath his feet crunched and squeaked as he walked across it. It had a hot and dusty smell that was different from the baked *regh* of the Barahileth. There were long looping arcs of dark liquid spattered across the surface, and he realized that he was looking at the drops of blood from the ruin of Saravasse's wing. She couldn't fly now. Bisochim didn't dare Heal her. Even if they could somehow find someone else who had the power, Tiercel didn't think that person could do it either. Saravasse had said she was a trap for Bisochim, but Tiercel didn't think Ahairan would have done something that *specific*. And if he was right, anyone who cast a spell on Saravasse would open a channel between themselves and Ahairan, allowing her to Taint and Overshadow them.

His headache had settled to a dull bearable pounding as the nausea and dizziness faded. He pulled his *chadar* even farther forward to shield his eyes from the glare. The green-and-white stripes hadn't seemed so bright back at Telinchechitl, but here in the bright dryness of the desert, the contrast between the wide bars of grass-green and white was eye-poppingly lurid. The front of his gray robe was stiff with dried blood. His robes were soaked with it. He wondered how he'd been injured before Bisochim had Healed him. Behind him, he could hear the faint sound of voices as Saravasse and Bisochim spoke together, but the sound was too low for him to make out the words. Tiercel sat down where he was and wrapped his arms around his knees. What were they going to do now? They couldn't get to the Veiled Lands. They couldn't even send a message.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there before he felt the ground shake with the impact of dragon footsteps. A long shadow covered him. He looked up to see Saravasse and Bisochim.

"I know not what we may do now, child," Bisochim said helplessly.

"It isn't just you, is it?" Tiercel said. His voice was cracked and rough—with thirst, with the screaming he'd done when Bisochim Healed him. "Anybody who tries to Heal Saravasse will be Tainted, won't they?" It didn't matter right now—*he* didn't have any Healing spells. But Harrier did. Any Wildmage did.

"Yes," Saravasse said softly. "I will never fly again."

"I will not believe that," Bisochim said in anguish. "Beloved, I cannot."

Tiercel put his head down on his knees. This was how it would end. Bisochim had held off Healing Saravasse once, in the heat of the moment—but how long could

he stand to watch her in agony? Tiercel didn't know how long Saravasse's injury would take to heal on its own, but from a conversation he'd had with Ancaladar once (oh, Ancaladar!) he knew that dragons healed very slowly. Normally this was no problem: a Bonded dragon would be Healed by his or her Bonded; an unBonded dragon would simply go off and sleep—for years, or even decades—until the injury had healed naturally. He didn't think Bisochim could maintain his resolve that long.

"Fine," Tiercel whispered. "Go ahead and Heal her. And give us all to the Dark."

"I know what you must think of me," Bisochim said.

"Oh, you have no idea," Tiercel answered, his voice a scratchy croak. "But it doesn't really matter. We're in the middle of the desert. We don't have any . . . things.

We can't go anywhere. You probably shouldn't have bothered to Heal me, because—"

"Water is a simple matter," Bisochim said. He stretched out his hand.

Tiercel yelped in dismay, and tried to scabble out of range of the spell, but he couldn't manage in time. His headache went from something he'd almost managed to forget to something that pounded so viciously that lights flashed behind his eyes with each beat of his heart, and renewed nausea cramped his stomach.

"It *hurts!* I told you it *hurts!*" Tiercel shouted at the top of his lungs. He curled up in a ball on the sand, wrapping his arms around his head. He was being childish but he was tired of pain, tired of loss, tired of failure. He'd expected to die, but not of something as *stupid* as being lost in the desert without supplies. He felt Bisochim place a hand on his shoulder. "Go away," he muttered, not moving.

"I am sorry, Tiercel," Bisochim said softly. "I shall not forget again."

"I'm sorry too." Tiercel sat up slowly.

It was irritating to feel guilty and justified at the same time. He'd always been *good* at everything, and he realized, with a lurch of despair, that this was actually the first thing in his entire life that he'd *failed* at. He was . . . He was seventeen now, he realized. *I got a Dragonbond as a Naming Day present*, Tiercel thought, and swallowed hard. And he'd succeeded at everything in his life up until this. His relationship with his parents was good. His schoolwork had always been easy. He hadn't made any enemies among his age-mates. And deep inside, he realized that he'd been expecting to succeed at this too.

And he hadn't.

"We may drink as we please," Bisochim said, breaking into Tiercel's unhappy reverie. He pointed, and Tiercel saw a pool of water where none had been. Its surface shimmered brightly in the sunlight, and he winced again in pain. "And Saravasse can give us warmth and shelter."

"So we're all right as long as Ahairan doesn't come back," Tiercel said.

Without waiting for an answer, he crawled over to the pool. Blood swirled away into the water as he dipped his hands into it to wash his face, then he drank until his stomach ached with cold. He sat up and looked at Bisochim.

"I cannot slay Ahairan, and she has made it impossible to summon aid," Bisochim said bleakly. "And you say that your Bonded is beyond your call."

"I lost him. He just vanished." Now all the things he hadn't told Bisochim before came tumbling out of Tiercel in a rush of words. About discovering the hidden city of Abi'Abadshar. About how Ancaladar had disappeared. How Harrier had Called Kareta. How Kareta had said Ancaladar was still alive. Somewhere. He began to explain that Abi'Abadshar had been built in the time of Elven Mages and their dragons and was a repository not only of ancient magic, but ancient lore as well.

"All very nice, but not terribly useful," Saravasse interrupted tartly. "We are here, not there, and I cannot fly. Once Ahairan realizes my Bonded does not intend to Heal me, she will return to kill us all."

"No," Tiercel said. He felt sick and unhappy as he worked it out, but it was logical, and as much as he hated thinking it, he knew he was right. "She doesn't want Bisochim to die. She wants Bisochim to *surrender*. Think about it. She's a Spirit of Darkness. What does she want?"

"To kill everyone," Saravasse said. "And eat them."

"To destroy the Light," Bisochim said.

"Maybe," Tiercel said doubtfully. "But I had visions of Ahairan for a whole year and she always wanted you to go to her. If she just wanted to *kill* you, she could have done that already. There has to be something else that she wants. Something more."

There was a long moment of silence. "There is," Bisochim said at last. "She wants to make more of her kind."

Tiercel stared at him, not understanding. "But . . . aren't there more? I *saw* them. Oh, Light, please tell me she can't open the doorway to that place by herself!"

"I think perhaps she could," Bisochim said quietly. "But not quickly, nor easily." His face twisted in anguish. "And what passed from that world to this would be naught but bodiless shadows. They might do harm, yes. Great harm. But only to Blight, not to Taint."

Tiercel frowned, trying to understand what Bisochim had just said. If he'd had the spellbooks he'd lost at Tamatha'Iteru—if he'd had *Ancaladar*—He took a deep breath. "They couldn't turn a Wildmage to the Dark," he said carefully.

"No," Bisochim said. "Nor could such bodiless shadows drive a creature from its body and take it for their own. They could kill, yes, and drive to madness again and again, and I know not if they could be slain. But nothing such as Ahairan can do. And it was I who crafted her a body, thinking I forged a prison—and not a weapon."

Tiercel closed his eyes tightly. Harrier would know the right questions to ask. All he had was the certainty that whatever ones he asked would be the wrong ones, and that he'd miss things he couldn't afford to miss. "She wants to make more of her own kind," he said, repeating Bisochim's own words.

"To breed a new race of Demons—here. Sprung from Men as the Endarkened were once created from the Elves," Bisochim answered bleakly.

"She wants *you*," Tiercel said in horror. It all made sense now. His visions. Why Ahairan would injure and bespell Saravasse. If Tiercel had not survived the fall—if Bisochim had not stopped to Heal him first—if Saravasse had not been able to warn him—if Bisochim had not been willing to listen—He shuddered with sudden chill, even in the heat of the desert sun.

"She said to me that she would make me King of Men if I would bow down and worship her. Do only that, and she would grant all that I wished." Bisochim's voice was anguished.

"I would rather die now—here, today—than live for eternity as a servant of the Dark," Saravasse said quietly.

Immortality, Tiercel thought. Ahairan might not be one of the Endarkened, but she'd been offering the same coin they'd always paid in. He blew out a short sharp breath and tried not to look as nauseated as he felt. Ahairan wanted Bisochim as her consort, to father a future race of Demons.

"It probably doesn't have to be you," Tiercel said aloud, unsure of whether or not he was offering comfort with his words. "Any Wildmage she could manage to Taint would do."

"Small consolation," Saravasse commented dryly.

"It might be," Tiercel said thoughtfully. "I don't know any nice way to say this, Bisochim, but . . . You have Saravasse. There was something Ahairan could offer you that you might have wanted enough to do what she wanted."

"But he didn't!" Saravasse said hotly.

"I know," Tiercel said apologetically. "I'm sorry. But the thing is, Bisochim is the only Dragonbond Wildmage there is, right? Because all the other dragons are Bonded to Elves." *Except for Ancaladar* . . .

"True," Saravasse admitted grudgingly.

“So unless Ahairan can hide what she really is from a Wildmage until she can figure out some way to trick them into doing what she wants, she can’t get a Wildmage to do what she wants. None of them would help her willingly, no matter what she promised them. The only other Wildmage here is Harrier, and *he* sure wouldn’t.” It abruptly occurred to Tiercel that it was because of what Bisochim had done that there were no other Wildmages in the south now, and he found the idea that Bisochim had been acting on behalf of the Wild Magic when he’d murdered Light knew how many people too disturbing to think about. “But that’s what Ahairan wants,” he said, talking very fast to keep himself from thinking about it. “A Wildmage to Taint. So she isn’t going to try to kill you. She needs to Taint you.”

“Or you, Tiercel,” Saravasse said softly. “You are not a Wildmage, but you *do* have magic. All you need do is bow down and worship her, and she would grant you anything you asked.”

“She can’t bring Ancaladar back,” Tiercel said roughly. “And that’s all I want.”



WHEN Harrier was a small boy—whenever he was tempted to hit things and yell—both his Ma and the Preceptor of the Light always told him to make a list of all the things in his life that made him happy. Right now that wouldn’t do a lot of good, because there was pretty much only one thing on it. The wells along the Dove Road were in fine shape and so far nobody was dead. All right, that was *two* things on his “happy list,” but that was about the only thing turning out better than he expected.

They traveled surrounded by bawling, complaining, footsore livestock, in the midst of a caravan of crying babies, crying children, constant chatter, and the eternal clanging *bells*. Harrier was pretty sure by now that the Nalzindar had the right idea in having saddles and bridles without ornaments. It was a fortnight since they’d left Telinchechitl and Tiercel was still gone. Shaiara was in a foul mood, and Harrier didn’t even need to wonder why. The caravan wasn’t managing to cover the distance from one well to the next in a night’s travel, and when they reached a well, getting all the water out of it that they needed took hours. That meant that instead of twenty days in the Barahileth, they’d be here closer to forty. There were newborn babies and people more than twice Harrier’s age in the caravan. Shaiara had mentioned casually that forty was old among the Isvaieni and sixty was ancient, and Harrier was pretty sure that *Ummara* Liapha must be even older than that because Shaiara had said scornfully—in Liapha’s hearing—that Liapha should have laid her bones on the sand a dozen years before. If they spent close to six sennights in the Barahileth they wouldn’t have to worry about Ahairan, because the desert itself would kill them.

To add to his misery, Harrier hadn’t been able to avoid Zanattar, either. A band of Lanzanur outriders led by Zanattar had caught up to the lead caravan a sennight after they’d left Telinchechitl. Zanattar had ridden forward to the lead caravan specifically to tell Harrier that once they got back to the Isvai *they were all going to go Demon-hunting*.

Harrier hadn’t seen Zanattar at all since their confrontation in the orchard, but apparently that meeting had convinced Zanattar that since Harrier was a Knight-Mage, and since Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy had been a Knight-Mage, and since Kellen had managed to help the Blessed Saint Idalia destroy the Endarkened, Harrier could destroy one little Demon all by himself since he had all of the Isvaieni to help him.



“THAT idea is the stupidest thing I have ever heard in the entire history of stupid things,” Harrier snarled very quietly. For once he was grateful for the eternal feuding between the tribes—since the Nalzindar tent was set at the edge of the Kadyastar tents, it meant that Zanattar’s tent was on the other side of the encampment, at the edge of the Barantar tents. Otherwise, he was sure Zanattar would have wanted to be next-door neighbors with his new hero, Harrier Gillain.

“Men are fools,” Shaiara said briefly.

“Thank you,” Harrier said, inclining his head in a sarcastic bow. It was just dawn, and the three of them were sitting in their tent. Shaiara and Ciniran had unbraided their hair and were combing it out. Once they were finished, they’d braid it up again. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to when they did it; they’d done it every night so far, but they hadn’t done it at all during the journey to Telinchechitl.

“A man will place his faith in a thing, and have that faith broken,” Shaiara said, speaking to the bone comb in her hand. “Yet he will not then see that faith is a precious thing he must hold close. Instead, he hastens to bestow his faith again.”

Harrier sighed. He knew what Shaiara was saying to him. “Zanattar is looking for something to believe in,” he said, grimacing. “Does it have to be the idea that I’m going to lead him on a Demon-hunting crusade? I just want him to go away.”

Shaiara said nothing further.

Harrier had to admit that a part of him felt that as long as Zanattar was thinking of Ahairan as something that could be fought with spears and swords, at least he wouldn’t be panicking. He’d already seen what happened when the Isvaieni turned into a panicky mob looking for the most convenient enemy, and he had no desire to see it twice.

“In four nights more, Ciniran and I depart,” Shaiara said when she finished her braid.

“At least if we’re near Abi’Abadshar that means only another ten days to Kannatha Well,” Harrier said. But that would mean it had taken the caravan eighteen days to cover a stretch of road it had taken the four of them ten days to travel, and they were moving slower every day. So twenty more days to Kannatha Well. At least.

“All goes as the Wild Magic wills,” Shaiara answered as she settled herself for sleep. Harrier had heard that phrase from her more times than he could count since he’d first arrived at Abi’Abadshar, but tonight there was a note in her voice he’d never heard before.

Irony.



HARRIER glanced around at the Barahileth, wondering how Shaiara could be so certain she was four days from the place where she needed to leave the Dove Road to go to Abi’Abadshar. While the Wild Magic told *him* exactly where it was, there weren’t any landmarks to guide her. She wouldn’t even have the marks they’d left on the *regh*: because of Bisochim’s rainstorm, the *regh* wasn’t one vast sweep of easily-marred nothing anymore. Where it was clay, it was covered with deep cracks where slurry had formed and dried. Where it was *ishnain* flats or salt flats, the hard pale surface gleamed in sharp contrast in the moonlight.

“It will be good to—” Shaiara began, raising her voice to be heard over the din of livestock and crying babies and *shotor*-bells.

Suddenly all the *khalbes* began to bark at once—short sharp deep-throated sounds of threat and challenge. The herds stopped plodding along and began to bunch together. Some of the goats tried to flee into the desert. Harrier had barely turned Lightfoot toward the sounds of the first disturbance when he heard a terrible shriek. The shriek was cut off abruptly, but before its echoes had died away, there were more. Not one, but dozens—the sounds of sheep and goats being maimed and killed—and over and above it, the frantic barking of the *khalbes*, ending over and over in shrieks like the first.

Harrier conjured a ball of Coldfire and sent it in the direction of the sounds. By its light, he could see the pale flashes of *ikulas*-hounds running in the direction of the screams, but he still couldn’t see what was attacking the herds. He urged Lightfoot toward the disturbance as the din from the caravan increased. Isvaieni from the back of the caravan were moving out from the road into the Barahileth as well.

Wait, no—Harrier thought suddenly. But it was too late to call them back. In the pale deceptive light of the Coldfire he could see a vague shadowy shape crouched over the bloody carcass of a dead sheep. A *khalbe* approached it; Harrier could tell by looking that the flockguard was barking furiously, but he couldn't hear the sound in the uproar of the caravan. At its approach, the creature raised its head and spat blackly. The thick dark liquid of its spittle struck the *khalbe* full in the face, and it began to howl in agony. In seconds it was convulsing and dying.

Their attackers were Goblins.

“*Back! Get back!*” Harrier shouted, but no one could hear him over the noise.

Goblins were creatures of Shadow. Their bite was poisonous, and now Harrier knew that they could spit poison as well. He couldn't think of anything they feared. Except fire.

The first spell, the simplest spell, one he'd mastered long ago. He summoned up the image of Simera's death-agonies within his mind—and cast Fire upon the Goblin as it moved toward the body of the *khalbe*. It burst instantly into flame, shrieking with a high-pitched howl that made all the dogs howl in sympathy. Its body burned with an oily black smoke. Harrier began looking about for more; he knew the creatures ran in packs. As he did, he conjured more Coldfire. Light was their most pressing need. He'd been a fool not to see to that sennights ago.

Fear was a metallic taste in his throat, and his heart hammered with panic and fury. What good did his Knight-Mage gifts or his Selken swords do against an enemy he couldn't even approach? He shouted at the Isvaieni to stay back, but only those closest to him could hear him. The Isvaieni understood poisonous creatures. The southern desert was full of them. But they'd never seen Goblins, and they didn't know how to fight them.

If the Goblins hadn't stopped to eat no matter what was happening around them, the caravan would have been doomed. There weren't just half-a-dozen of them as there'd been at Windy Meadows, there were hundreds. They rose up out of the *regh* as if it were water. They attacked the sheep and the goats, and when the *khalbes* and the herdsmen attempted to protect their charges, the Goblins killed them too.

Everywhere the Goblins stopped to feed, Harrier set them on fire, shouting out warnings and explanations to the Isvaieni. By the time the Goblins began to approach the caravan itself, Harrier's warnings had been understood. Each time a Goblin rose up out of the *regh*, it became the target of a dozen arrows. As it thrashed in its death-agonies, other Goblins would swarm to devour it, becoming the target of arrows in their turn. In that fashion, the Isvaieni built themselves protection from the bodies of their enemies, because the Goblins would stop to feed on their own dead, and when they did, the Isvaieni would kill more of them, and so more of them would be drawn to the feeding ground.

But the battle did not go all their way.



HARRIER scanned the desert, looking for Goblins. The dead animals and dead Goblins had all been devoured, and the living animals were now too widely scattered to provide tempting targets for the Goblin pack. He didn't see any live Goblins, but it was too much to hope for that they'd all left. He turned Lightfoot back toward the Dove Road. What had been an orderly caravan only an hour before was now a disorderly mob that was both spread out over too much of the desert to organize and too clustered together for safety. *There's only one bunched-up group of prey left out here*, he realized suddenly.

“Spread out!” Harrier shouted, waving his arms. “They're going to—”

Instinct, paranoia, or Knight-Mage gifts made him jump from Lightfoot's back a bare instant before the *shotor* bawled in pain and lunged forward, her long legs already trembling and unsteady. A swarm of Goblins clawed their way up over her body, devouring her alive. Harrier set them aflame, shouting in anger, knowing that Lightfoot had been dead from the moment the first of them had bitten her.

“*Harrier!*” Ciniran was racing toward him on her own *shotor*, her hand held out to him. He grabbed her wrist and leaped upward as she swept past him, clinging to her waist as he sat awkwardly astride the *shotor*'s back.

“Scatter!” he shouted to the Isvaieni, as Ciniran raced back toward the caravan. He could see Goblins on the ground in the middle of it now, and as he watched helplessly—unable to cast Fire effectively or safely into the midst of so many people—another *shotor* went down, flinging its rider into the midst of the monsters. He shouted the single word over and over and soon it was taken up by others, and the caravan fragmented like a glass bowl dropped on a stone floor.

“Shaiara?” he asked when Ciniran had at last allowed her exhausted beast to drop to a walk. The desert was silent now—and that was good. The next segment of the caravan was almost a day behind them, but sound carried for miles in the desert. If Harrier didn't hear anything, that meant they weren't being attacked.

Or it might mean they were all dead.

“Alive, I think. She was when last I saw her. Harrier—those creatures—”

“Goblins. I've seen them before.” He'd seen them almost a year ago, long before Ahairan had gotten free. But the Balance had been shifting even then, and the Dark had been gaining in power—enough so that the ancient creatures of Darkness could reappear. And now that Ahairan was actually here, there'd be more of them.



AS soon as they set the tents for day, Harrier went to Liapha's tent, summoning Zanattar, Shaiara, Anipha, and Sathan to join him. Anipha and Sathan were the *Ummarai* of the Kamazan and Barantar tribes, as Liapha was of the Kadyastar, Shaiara was of the Nalzindar, and Zanattar . . . well, Zanattar was mainly an annoying bully, in Harrier's opinion, which meant he'd be a lot more trouble if he was being left out than if he was being left in. Harrier didn't like including Zanattar in his council of war any more than he liked having a council of war in the first place, but he didn't see any choice about either one. He was a Knight-Mage, and he could—he thought—hold a walled city against a siege, with enough soldiers and supplies. But he wasn't sure what to do to defend nomads spread out over several hundred miles of road against attacks by Darkspawn monsters in the middle of a desert doing its best to kill *all* of them. For that, he needed expert advice.

The tent was already stifflingly warm when Harrier—the last inside—entered. He barely noticed. The *kaffeyah* without which no gathering among the Isvaieni could apparently proceed had already been brewed. When he was served, he took a courtesy sip and set the cup aside.

“I wanted to talk to all of you about what happened tonight,” he said. “I know it's bad, and none of us was expecting it.”

He wasn't sure what was worse, really—that anyone had died at all, or how some of them had died. Even after he'd given the warning, and they knew what sort of enemy they faced, Harrier had seen some of the Isvaieni go running away from the caravan, toward the nearest pack of Goblins they could see. They'd died instantly. “I wanted to share what I know.”

“And we will all hope that Sathan will spare us his speeches of how Barantar wisdom might have prevented all. I am an old woman and need my sleep.” Liapha reached down to fondle the ears of the *ikulas* whose head rested upon her knee. The hunting hound closed its eyes and sighed in pleasure.

Sathan cleared his throat irritably, but didn't take Liapha's bait.

“I know you've all gotten some of the story in the last several hours,” Harrier said quickly, before the Kadyastar *Ummara* could set another barb. “I don't know whether we'll be attacked again tonight or not. We're safe during the day. Goblins can't stand light. You need to tell your people not to waste their arrows, because they're going to run out of them, and you can't attack Goblins with *awardans*. It has to be arrows or spears—anything that will kill at a distance.”

“Will a sling-stone kill one?” Zanattar asked.

“I don’t know,” Harrier said. “Maybe. I know that fire will kill them—they burn like an oil-soaked rag.” He winced at the image, and changed the subject quickly. “How many died last night?”

“We will not have the final tally until tonight,” Sathan said, refusing to look at Harrier. “A dozen. Perhaps more.”

“But the flocks are gone—every goat and *khalbe* of the Kamazan, the sheep of the Barantar, the flocks of the Kadyastar—gone,” Anipha said bitterly, her voice jagged with anger. “Do we dare wander the Barahileth like homeless ghosts chasing after goats when the night is filled with Demons and their servants? *I* do not.”

“No one does,” Shaiara said sharply. “One does not survive the Barahileth by lingering in it. If you are indeed all brothers—as Zanattar has claimed—then claim a brothers’ right from those who yet have sheep and goats and can spare them.”

“Which *nobody* might by the time we reach the other side,” Harrier said quickly. “I don’t know a lot about Goblins. Tiercel’s the one who knows things like that. I don’t know a lot about ancient history, either. But I’m pretty sure that the Goblins were the servants of the Queen of the Endarkened. If they’re here, they were *sent* here. By Ahairan.” He waited a moment for that to sink in, then continued before any of them could say anything. “*Not* to wipe us out. Just to make it harder for us to survive.”

Sathan laughed mockingly. “Northern Wildmage, have you not noticed where you are? This is the Barahileth—it is where the sun goes to get warm!”

He yelped in surprise as Liapha raised her walking staff and struck him across the shoulders. “Show respect to your betters, Barantar whelp. Harrier has come down from the Cold North to die here on the Forge of the Sun with us for the sake of a prophecy.”

“It cannot be much of a prophecy if he’s going to die,” Sathan muttered, half under his breath, but the others looked interested.

Harrier sighed and shook his head, realizing that he wasn’t going to be let to get any farther with this spur-of-the-moment strategy meeting until he’d explained this mysterious “prophecy” to everyone’s satisfaction. Reasonable or not, the Isvaieni *Ummarai* felt they had a right to know about it for whatever bearing it might have on their futures and those of the people they led. “All right,” he said. “It isn’t *my* prophecy—and just so you know, I’m not planning on dying *anyway*. If I tell you about it, can we get back to planning what to do about the Goblins?”

“By all means,” Liapha said smoothly. “But let us hear your words now, Harrier of the Two Swords. We have long lacked a talesinger in the tents of the Kadyastar.”

Harrier took a deep breath and tried to think of the way Flowering Day stories were told, and the way all the stories in *The Book of the Light* were written, and how all the stories went whenever Shaiara or Ciniran explained something. “Long before Tiercel was born, the Elder Brothers knew that the Dark was going to come back. But they didn’t know how it would come, or where, or when, or how to fight it when it came. So they waited. And Tiercel was born, and when he was, the Wild Magic knew that he would be the Chosen Champion of the Light, because he’d been born with the power to become a High Mage, just as there had been a thousand years ago. So when he grew up, and discovered his MageGift, he went to the Veiled Lands, and the Elder Brothers told him about the prophecy . . .” And Tiercel had been completely horrified, but that didn’t make a good story. “And then we left the Elven Lands, and we came here.”

“And while they two were in the Veiled Lands, for how should it be but that one who had shared Tiercel Northerner’s tent from the time they were boys would go with him, even knowing that his journey carried him to the ends of the world, and so did Harrier accompany his friend, a golden unicorn more beautiful than the dawn came before Harrier, and brought to him the Three Books. Kareta the Golden spoke these words to Harrier, son of the *chaharum* of the *Ummara* of Armethalieh: *Harrier of the Cold North, I call upon you to become a Knight-Mage, first in the land since Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy.* And then did Harrier bow down and weep, and said to Kareta the Golden: *this is a destiny far too glorious for me, who am only the son of a chaharum, you must look elsewhere.* Three times did Kareta offer him the Books of the Wild Magic, and three times did he refuse them in his humility, until at last did Kareta the Golden say to him that he must take up this great burden so that he might guard his friend through the many dangers that would certainly befall him, until the time of the prophecy was fulfilled,” Shaiara finished. She gazed at Harrier, frowning triumphantly, and he had no difficulty deciphering her expression. *See? This is how a story is told.*

Harrier did his best not to glare at her, though he wasn’t very happy with the idea that you could tell a story that was more-or-less what had happened and have it end up sounding completely like a lie. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“So we’ve been attacked by Goblins once, and we need to expect it again. That means we have to warn everybody in the caravans behind us—if they haven’t been attacked already, they probably will be. They need to know what to do.” He ran his hand through his hair, dislodging his *chadar*. “We need to spread out even more than we have been when we travel. Anyone who has livestock needs to break it into smaller groups for droving. Who’s directly behind us? Does anyone know?”

“It is the Lanzanur, Harrier,” Zanattar said quietly. “We travel with the Kareggi.”

Harrier nodded. “I’m sure *Ummara* Fannas can spare some animals to replace what we’ve lost. And we’ll leave the well uncapped when we reach it. It should attract all of our animals that have survived.” He held up a hand to forestall objections. “I know it wastes water. But those wells are tapping the bedrock water. They won’t go dry in a day or two. We can’t chase our livestock, so we have to lure it. We’ll seal them again in a day or two. Any of the animals we haven’t gotten back will be dead by then.”

The others nodded slowly. No one was happy with the thought of leaving a well open to the desert sun, but they were less happy with the thought of losing valuable animals.

“Now, we’re all safe during the day—Goblins don’t like light—and tonight when we break camp, I’ll ride back up the road and speak with *Ummara* Fannas and *Ummara* Kataduk, and give them the news. If they don’t already have it.”

“And this you must not do, Harrier,” Liapha said quietly. “It is true that any man—even a Wildmage—may die. This is a bitter lesson that we have all learned in these past seasons. But it would be a hard thing for us if you should vanish upon the road and no man or woman of us could say truly what had happened to you. Better for all if my sister’s son Hadyan rides forth upon the swiftest *shotor* that the Kadyastar possess. Let these creatures—if they come again—attempt to bite the wind, for they will find that as easy a task as claiming Hadyan as their prey. He will say to *Ummara* Fannas and *Ummara* Kataduk all as you would say it yourself, and then let them send riders on to warn those who go behind, and when the message has been sent to all, the telling of that shall be sent forward again until it reaches us.”

Harrier nodded absently, thinking. “I think we need to send riders up and down the whole caravan anyway. Constantly. Otherwise . . . how will we know if something happens to the people at the back?” The last of the Isvaieni had probably left Telinchechitl nine or ten days ago. But did any of them know for sure?

“This is wise,” Sathan said slowly, as if he was looking for some reason to say it wasn’t.

“A Barantar would say a ram was white when it was black,” Anipha said. “Or merely *wish* it white when all could see it was black. When has a Blue Robe spoken other than wisdom?” She got to her feet. “Now I will sleep. Perhaps *you* will wish to walk across the desert and petition Sand and Star for more water to fall from the sky.”

“I’d say not to fight,” Harrier said tiredly, getting to his feet as well, “but I’m not going to waste my energy. Do whatever you please. You’ll either survive whatever Ahairan does—or you won’t.” He stepped over to the door and ducked out through the flap, shutting it behind him as quickly as he could. As he walked back to the Nalzindar encampment, he thought that Da would have given him a hiding he’d remember for a long time to hear him talk to men and women twice his age the way he just had. But they were the *Ummarai* of their tribes. They’d all seen the Goblins last night. And all they could think of to do now was argue about goats like a classroom full of his age-mates.

The sun was already two hands above the horizon, and their surviving *shotors* were already settled on the ground around their tent. Harrier hated the fact that Lightfoot's death mattered more to him than the deaths of all the *people* who'd died last night. But he hadn't known them. And Lightfoot had been ugly and she'd *stank*, and she'd spit on him more than once, but she hadn't asked to be here and she hadn't wanted to be eaten alive.

He ducked into their tent. There was a waterskin hanging from the central tent-pole, and he took a couple of sparing swallows. By the time he'd stripped down to his under-robe, Shaiara was ducking into the tent and turning to tie the tent flaps closed.

"It's six days to Abi'Abadshar, and six days back," he said wearily. "You know you don't dare go there now. It's too dangerous." He didn't want another argument, especially now, but there was no real point in delaying it, either.

"We will speak of it later," Shaiara answered quietly. "Together we will number the dangers and take counsel."

It was the best he was going to get. He was exhausted. He slept.

Eight



An Unlikely Alliance

DESPITE HIS TIREDNESS, Harrier was awake an hour earlier than usual. The heat was like a heavy weight, and he could tell by the color of the light that it was just before sunset. Knowing that they were still half a night's ride from the next well made him even thirstier than usual. He dressed quickly and slipped outside. The whole camp was eerily silent. Tents dotted the *regh* for hectares around—featureless tight-closed objects in every shade of dun and gray and charcoal, their colors ruddy in the red-gold brightness of late afternoon—each one surrounded by the sand-colored mounds of sleeping *shotors*. This morning, for the first time since they'd left Telinchechit, no awnings had been erected to provide shelter to the flocks, because the flocks were gone. As he stood looking around, Harrier realized that he was counting tents, as if he felt a need to make sure that something hadn't come for the Isvaieni during the day.

He'd liked it better when he'd still been able to hate them.

But day by day, hour by hour, they'd been turning into smaller and smaller groups in his mind. First they'd just been "the Isvaieni army." Then the army who'd ridden out and the people who'd stayed behind. Now they were just Liapha and Kisrah and Marnet and Sathan and Rinurta and Hadyan and a hundred others, and some of them had ridden with Zanattar and some of them hadn't, and Harrier was ashamed because it no longer made any difference to him who had and who hadn't. They'd all become people he cared about. It made him feel as if he was being unfaithful to everyone who'd died at Tarnatha'Iteru. In all the *Iteru*-cities. But those people were dead, and these people were still alive. He didn't know what to think. Not really.

He managed a rueful smile. *You're just lucky that the Wild Magic isn't about thinking, aren't you? You'd really be stuck now if Kareta'd said you had to become a Preceptor of the Light.*

And then there was movement at a few of the other tents, and the camp slowly woke into life.



WHILE Harrier was helping to strike the Nazindar tent, Hadyan came to find him. Hadyan would ride back along the Dove Road with five other messengers, all Kadyastar, so that in case of attack, one of them would make it through with Harrier's message. As Harrier went over his message with Hadyan and the others in Liapha's tent, Harrier realized unhappily that he had no way to *make* the other *Ummarai* do what he wanted. They'd do it—or not. He shrugged mentally. *One is only safe when he is dead, or when he is yet unborn.* If he didn't get out of this damned desert soon, nobody was going to be able to understand a word he said back on the Docks.

When he was finished, he put the messengers' fates out of his mind as best he could and returned to the matter of getting ready to travel. Shaiara was right: they didn't dare stay in the Barahileth one moment longer than absolutely necessary.

Tonight he was riding a new *shotor*. Shaiara hadn't had any animals to spare—all the ones she'd gotten from Liapha were carrying their supplies—and as far as Harrier had been able to make out, she'd simply gone and *stolen* one from the Barantar. "Harrier of the Two Swords has need of a *shotor*," she'd said, walking up to the tent next to theirs, and the Isvaieni saddling animals had put a lead-rope into her hand. "And a saddle," she'd added, and the man had brought a saddle out of the tent and set it on the *shotor's* back.

"Shaiara! You can't just do that!" he'd said, when she'd come walking back to their tent with the saddled *shotor*. "Isn't that charity?" he'd added in an undertone.

"How so, when it is provided to the Wildmage who by his magic has saved the lives of all?" Shaiara asked coolly. "Did I think you would have asked your due of the Barantar unprompted, I would have left you to do it. I have walked across the Barahileth, Harrier. It is better to ride. Cut the bells from the saddle first."

So he did. Rode, and made Coldfire, and thought.

Harrier's second-oldest brother, Carault, had been apprenticed on a Deep Ocean trader since Harrier was eight and Carault was sixteen. Whenever *Bold Venture* was in port, Carault had entertained himself by forcing Harrier to listen to lectures on everything the future captain of such a vessel would need to know. Harrier had hated it at the time, especially since he'd thought he'd never leave Armethalieh, but if he could, he'd thank Carault for all his aggravating speeches. From the moment he'd realized that he'd be leading the Isvaieni through the Barahileth, Harrier had drawn on those lessons. And what Carault had passed on to him was even more important now that there was an active threat. People could panic just like goats. Panicking, running away, they couldn't afford any of it. So Harrier spun globes of Coldfire from his hands as he rode that night and pretended he wasn't terrified, remembering the Second Law of the Sea: *if the captain is calm, the crew will think there's nothing to fear.*

The Isvaieni weren't his crew, he wasn't their captain, and the Barahileth wasn't the sea. The *First* Law of the Sea was that the captain's word was law, and Harrier could barely make suggestions. And none of that mattered. They'd *still* panic if they saw he was afraid, and they were less likely to if they saw he wasn't.

By the time it was fully dark, Harrier had created enough Coldfire to light most of the desert to full-moon brightness. It was a little more than a moonturn since the four of them had set out from Abi'Abadshar; the moon was just past dark now. He could not count on any help from the moonlight to discourage the Goblins. He wasn't sure that even the Coldfire would be enough. At least this was the smallest group of Isvaieni traveling across the Barahileth. The Kadyastar were a wealthy tribe, but not large. Its wealth came from deep-desert mines, trade, and alliance. The Kamazan were another small tribe—he thought, from listening to Anipha argue with Sathan, that it had less than two hundred members. Most of the Isvaieni here were Barantar. The Barantar's wealth was sheep and goats, and most of it had been *eaten* last night. The only good thing anyone could say about that was that it had made Sathan willing to listen to *suggestions* tonight, and so tonight the Isvaieni traveled less as a disciplined caravan than as a widely-scattered horde, but the most important thing was not to travel a tight cluster that would be attractive to hungry . . . things. Harrier didn't want anything to happen, but at the same time, the fact that nothing did gave him too much time to worry.

And the thing he worried about most was that Tiercel still hadn't come back.

Hadn't come back—and hadn't sent help.

IT was a few hours before midnight when the next well came into sight. They'd lose hours of possible travel time filling the waterskins and letting the *shotors* drink, but they had no choice. The caravan was closing around the well when suddenly Harrier's attention was pulled northward as sharply as if someone had shouted his name. There was nothing to see in the darkness, and he barely kept himself from groaning out loud. Something was coming. But dragons would fly, and this was moving along the ground, and he'd be able to see the light of a unicorn's body from miles away.

"Wait here," he said to Shaiara and Ciniran. He tapped his *shotor* on the shoulder with his goad, urging it down the road at a quick trot.

"WHICH part of 'wait' did you not understand?" Harrier demanded a moment later, as Shaiara's *shotor* drew level with his. He glanced toward her once, then away, peering into the darkness. There was still nothing to see.

"Someone must carry news of your death!" she cried, her tone equally exasperated.

He didn't bother to argue further, and he didn't try to force his *shotor* from a trot to a gallop. Its trot was bad enough; he wasn't sure he could stay on the saddle at the gallop. He missed Lightfoot, whose gaits had been smooth and easy. Only now that she was gone did Harrier realize that she must have been a queen among *shotors*.

Soon Harrier could see a cloud of dust on the horizon—a large one. For one wild moment he thought that First Magistrate Vaunnel's army had already arrived. But even if she meant to send an army against the Isvaieni, it couldn't have gotten here so fast. He tapped his *shotor* again, signaling it to stop. He wanted to make more Coldfire, and he couldn't do that while the *shotor* was bouncing down the road. Shaiara trotted a few paces past him, then circled back, seeing what he'd seen. "It comes quickly," she said, her voice somber.

"Yeah," Harrier said, "it does." The dust cloud was already much bigger than it had been when he'd first seen it. "I don't know what it is."

FOR the first several days they spent in the Isvai, it didn't even occur to Tiercel to ask where they were going. Saravasse was badly injured and—once the first shock of the injury wore off—in terrible pain. Bisochim had washed her wounds clean, straightened the broken wing-ribs, helped Saravasse fold the shattered wing, and tied it closed with strips torn from his sash. There was nothing more he could do. Her wounds had gone on bleeding for several days before they'd finally closed. A dragon's blood was a shade of red so dark it was nearly violet.

Her pain made her moody and irritable and the injury made her ravenous. Bisochim had to spend hours each evening and morning calling enough prey to feed her now-ravenous appetite. When she ate, Tiercel tried to be as far away as possible. Watching Ancaladar eat had never bothered him, but now the sights and sounds reminded him too much of his dreams.

In between those times—several hours in the morning, until it got too hot—several hours in the afternoon, until it was time to stop and hunt—several hours at night, until it got too cold—they walked. At night, when they couldn't walk any longer, they lay down, huddled against Saravasse's enormous body for warmth, and slept. And every night Tiercel woke Bisochim with his screams.

At least now Tiercel was certain that he was having nightmares and not visions, because they were a jumble of his most terrible memories and his deepest fears. He always dreamed of Ahairan stalking through the streets of Tarnatha'Iteru, her scarlet robes fluttering in the wind. Behind her walked everyone Tiercel had ever known—his friends, his family, his teachers—but all of them were dead. His only comfort was that he didn't dream of Armethalieh and he didn't dream of Harrier. If he'd dreamed of either one, he might have gone mad with fear, but he knew Tarnatha'Iteru was gone. He'd destroyed it himself.

But one, then two, then five days had passed without Ahairan returning. First Tiercel was grateful that she hadn't come back to kill them, then he was afraid that she was doing something horrible somewhere else. Then he realized that *they* still had to do something. Saravasse had regained a lot of her strength, and the bleeding from her shattered wing had stopped. It was true she could no longer fly, but she could still walk, and maybe, soon, even run.

And then he realized that they'd been going *somewhere* for almost a sennight.

"YOU know," he said cautiously one morning, "I'm not an expert on Elven Magery, but maybe when we get through Pelashia's Veil, the Elven Mages can think of a way to Heal Saravasse without getting Tainted by Ahairan."

Saravasse made a wordless noise of derision.

When Bisochim Called game to feed Saravasse, he Called game to feed the two of them as well. He had his *geschak*, and so he was able to skin and dress the animals he summoned, and either he or Tiercel could have Called Fire to light a cookfire. But here, in the midst of the endless dune sea, there was nothing to use as fuel. They ate their meat raw, just as Saravasse did. Tiercel could barely stomach it.

"We go to Telinchechtl," Bisochim said. "Ten days—no more—will see us to the edge of the Barahileth. We must cross it in a night."

"I shall not fail you in this, Beloved," Saravasse said proudly.

"I—Wait—What? We're . . . but we have to *tell somebody*. We have to get help," Tiercel said. He'd had little appetite for breakfast. Now he lost that little appetite entirely.

"My madness and pride have already caused the death of thousands of those whom I was charged to protect," Bisochim said. "To call water from the deep earth to quench the Lake of Fire, I fear I have once more set a desert in place of a garden. It may even now be too late to save them."

"The storm wouldn't . . ." Tiercel began, although he didn't think arguing would do any good.

"Not the storm, child!" Saravasse snapped. "Or didn't you happen to notice the *lake*? There was a *tehukohiakharishtial* there before. A large hollow mountain filled with liquid rock," she added, seeing Tiercel's look of incomprehension.

"Oh," Tiercel said quietly. "I'd wondered what happened to it."

He wondered if Harrier was already dead.

"I DO not know how we can journey to the far land where the Sword of Light lies," Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy said. "For Anigrel the Black is the true son of the Endarkened Queen, and he has placed a curse upon my head, that if my foot touches the ground within the Lands of Men once the sun has risen, then I will be turned to stone."

And the Magic Unicorn Shalkan laughed, and his laugh was like silver bells. "Only set yourself upon my back, Prince Kellen, and I shall run over land and

sea, and we shall be in the Land of the Elves before the sun shall rise, and the foul curse of Anigrel the Black shall be broken.”

And Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy had great wonder in his heart at the words of Shalkan the Magic Unicorn, but he did as he was commanded, and Shalkan began to run, faster than the very wind itself. . .

The Song of Kellen's Ride was a popular part of Kellen's story. It didn't make a good play, but there were countless songs and poems written about it. Some good, some bad, and the most famous, of course, was the one every child learned in the nursery, with the chorus: *Run, run, Shalkan, run, the sun is at your heel / and you shall guide your Rider through the depths of his ordeal*. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Tiercel had listened to Kareta and Ancaladar bicker about which of them was faster.

The moon had been dark when he, Harrier, Ciniran, and Shaiara had left Abi'Abadshar. It was dark again—maybe a day or so past—when Tiercel stood with Bisochim and Saravasse beside Kannatha Well and watched the sun slide toward the horizon. Then he and Bisochim climbed onto Saravasse's back.

And Saravasse began to run.

In the air a dragon was fast, able to cover hundreds of miles in a day, but it didn't *seem* fast, because there were no landmarks in the sky to tell you how fast you were going. On the ground, it was different.

"I do not know how we can journey to the far land where the Sword of Light lies . . ."

Shaiara had said it took the Nazindar a fortnight to go from Kannatha Well to Abi'Abadshar. Tiercel remembered that it had taken the four of them ten days to go from Abi'Abadshar to Telinchechitl. The Dove Road ran straight across the Barahileth from Kannatha Well to Telinchechitl, so it would take less time for them to get from here to Telinchechitl than the time from Kannatha Well—to Abi'Abadshar—to Telinchechitl, but whether it was a fortnight or a sennight didn't matter. They had to get there before sunrise. *"Run, run, Shalkan, run, the sun is at your heel—"* Tiercel's mind chanted. But this was no wondertale whose ending he knew. Only one thing was the same as in *The Song of Kellen's Ride*. If they were in the wrong place when the sun rose, they'd die.

At first Tiercel could keep his eyes open. Then the sound of the wind passing over Saravasse's wings—one tightly folded, the other carefully bound closed—rose from a moan to a whistle to a scream, and he had to close his eyes. He counted his heartbeats, lost count, and began counting again. It was useless. There was no way for him to keep track of time. He only knew that it began to seem as if Saravasse had been running forever. The wind flattened his *chadar* smotheringly against his face and made the loose folds of his robes snap with the loud sounds of whipcracks.

Suddenly he heard Bisochim's voice, loud over the whistle of the wind. "The desert—it is filled with light!"

Tiercel hadn't thought it was possible, but Saravasse seemed to run even faster, so fast that now he could feel invisible hands pulling at him, dragging him backward along her spine. He wanted to protest, to say that if people were meant to go this fast they weren't meant to do it on the ground, but he couldn't catch his breath in order to speak.

"Coldfire!" Saravasse cried a moment later. Her voice was so breathless that Tiercel couldn't tell what she thought. If it was Coldfire, it had to be Harrier. He opened his eyes, squinting against the wind, and if his grip on Bisochim hadn't been automatic by now, he would have let go.

The desert *was* filled with light. There was so much Coldfire that Tiercel couldn't count the individual globes. By their light he could see hundreds of black dots that had to be *shotors*.

Doesn't he know that Ahairan will see them?

In the same moment, he realized that Saravasse was stopping. She couldn't slow herself by spreading her wings now. Tiercel gritted his teeth against a series of bone-jarring hops and bounces, clinging to Bisochim as hard as he could.

Then—suddenly, finally—they were no longer moving.

"What are you doing here?" a familiar voice demanded.

Tiercel blinked, shoving his now-filthy *chadar* out of his eyes, and looked down at Harrier and Shaiara.

"I journey to Telinchechitl," Bisochim said in confusion.

"Well don't bother—there's nothing there," Harrier snapped. He tapped his *shotor* on the shoulder. "All the fountains stopped working the day you left. So *we* left."

He stepped from his *shotor*'s back and walked toward Saravasse. She crouched down, and Tiercel slid off her back and all the long way down along her side with a groan of relief. His legs had gone numb during the long jarring ride, and when his feet struck the road, they buckled under him. He sat down on the ground with a grunt of surprise. Harrier walked over to him and stared down at him.

"Tell me you got to the Veiled Lands before whatever happened to Saravasse happened to her. Tell me that's why you've been gone so long. Tell me there's a good reason Bisochim didn't Heal her," Harrier said urgently.

"There's a good reason," Tiercel said. He looked past Harrier's shoulder, to the sky filled with Coldfire. He couldn't imagine how long it had taken Harrier to make all of that, or why he had. "Har—why—she'll see you. You—You're—"

"We were attacked by Goblins last night," Harrier answered harshly. "They got all of the livestock, and twenty-three people. I'm sorry if the fact that I want to be able to see them when they come back annoys you."

Tiercel scrambled quickly to his feet and stared at the ground in distrust. Harrier was still looking at him, waiting for his answer.

"We didn't reach the Veiled Lands," Saravasse said, answering for him. "I am sorry. I tried."

Harrier swung toward Saravasse. "You can talk," he said, sounding stunned. Tiercel realized that while he'd had a fortnight to get used to the fact that Saravasse talked, the last time Harrier had seen her she'd been mute and cowed.

"How surprising," Saravasse replied cuttingly, her patience exhausted.

"Why didn't you keep going?" Harrier demanded. "If you could run back here, you could have run there."

"Don't you even care that she's hurt?" Tiercel demanded. "Ahairan attacked us and tore her wing off! We *fell out of the sky!* You don't even care that we were almost killed!"

"But you *weren't* killed!" Harrier shouted back. "You're alive! I told them help was coming"—he gestured back in the direction of the Isvaieni—"and it isn't! You could have kept going! You could at least have gotten to Armethalieh—*warned* somebody! And all you did was turn around and come back here! You—He—How could you—He wouldn't even Heal her!"

"He *can't!*" Tiercel yelled, just as loudly as Harrier had. "You can't! No one can! If you'd just—"

He yelped and jumped back as Saravasse thrust her enormous head between them, separating them before words could become blows. "If you would *both* stop shouting and start listening, I will explain," she said tartly.

Her explanation was quick and concise. Ahairan's attack. The spell Ahairan had cast upon her. Bisochim's decision to return because he feared Telinchechitl's magic was failing.

"Well, he was right about *that*," Harrier muttered.

"Quiet," Saravasse snapped. "And so we returned. Why did you leave?"

Harrier gave her a sullen suspicious look, as if he still wasn't sure why she'd suddenly started talking. Tiercel reminded himself again that Harrier had only seen Saravasse once, briefly, a fortnight before. For Tiercel this wasn't a sudden change. For Harrier, it was.

"The Isvaieni chose to leave Telinchechitl because they had regained their senses, and knew that Bisochim had fed them upon the bread of lies," Shaiara said.

Saravasse tipped her head to regard Shaiara. A dragon's face wasn't shaped to display expression, but if Saravasse could have glared, she would have.

Shaiara ignored her. "Nor was there safety there. For them, should Ahairan return, or for us, who had come to slay her, for Zanattar, son of Kataduk, would not believe that Harrier was not a Demon, and Bisochim was not there to set his word against that of the foolish Lanzanur."

"Also, all the water had dried up and the lake was probably going to disappear any minute," Harrier interrupted. "So it didn't matter much when he changed his mind—which he did." Shaiara glared at him. "Are we done?"

"This cannot be all the people," Bisochim said, staring out at the desert.

"No," Harrier said. "Since I'm not an *amazing* Dragonbond Wildmage, they had to split up into small enough groups to be able to use your stupid wells. Come on. We need to go and tell everyone that you're back."



THEY walked back up the road together. Harrier and Shaiara led their *shotors*, and Tiercel and Bisochim walked with them. Every several dozen steps of theirs, Saravasse would take one careful step—the ground still quivered—and then wait for them to draw ahead again. After a few minutes, Harrier said: "Unless you're planning to bespell several hundred *shotors* all at the same time, Saravasse should probably wait outside the camp. It'd be nice if you could figure out a way to round up any of the missing livestock we lost last night, too."

Harrier's tone was so rude that Tiercel was tempted to just haul off and hit him. He didn't know what Bisochim was thinking.

"I shall do what I can," Bisochim said quietly.

A few minutes later, Saravasse lay down in the middle of the road and announced that she would stop here. Harrier began coaxing his *shotor* to kneel. He didn't know why it hadn't just bolted at the sight of Saravasse—Shaiara's hadn't because it had gotten used to Ancaladar, and Harrier guessed that one dragon was pretty much like another if you were a *shotor*—but possibly his new mount was just really apathetic.

"Come on," he said to Tiercel. "Let's get back so we can tell everyone we're stopping for the day."

"I'd rather walk," Tiercel said. He was still aching from the long jarring run and didn't want to ride *anything*, but from the way Harrier turned away, Tiercel suspected that Harrier thought that his answer meant that they were still fighting. And maybe they were.

"I, too, shall remain," Bisochim said. "I wish solitude to weave what spells I may."

"Don't take too long," Harrier said briefly. His *shotor* was rising to its feet. Without waiting for an answer, he clucked to his mount and it began to trot off up the road. Shaiara followed.

"Your friend has much anger in him," Bisochim said. He sounded vaguely puzzled, just as if the last time he'd seen Harrier, Harrier hadn't also been issuing threats and demands.

"Yeah, well, he always did," Tiercel said awkwardly. "I think he was counting on us coming back with help."

"Does he think it was our idea not to?" Saravasse said irritably.

Bisochim had never really recovered, Tiercel thought, from the shock of discovering that he'd summoned a Demon and been responsible for the death of uncounted thousands of people—both the Isvaieni who'd died destroying the *Iteru*-cities, and the people who'd lived in them. Sometimes—in the last fortnight—he'd seemed almost normal, but more of the time he'd spent silent and withdrawn, locked in the prison of his own thoughts. Saravasse more than made up for any silence on his part with her forceful—not to say acerbic—presence.

"No, no, of course not," Tiercel said hastily. "It's just that—" *Harrier never wanted to be here. I don't either, but he had more of a choice than I did. And I know he doesn't want to have to spend all of his time being nice to the Isvaieni army.* He gestured helplessly. He had no idea what he meant, much less of what to say.

"You should go and talk to him," Saravasse said, more gently now. "And now that you know that we are not to travel to Telinchechitl, you must decide what to do next."

"I know," Tiercel said. "I'll try to make him . . ." *Calm down? See reason?* He didn't finish that sentence either. He raised his hand in a half wave and began walking up the road.

After a few minutes he heard the sound of hammering begin to echo across the desert. The Isvaieni were making camp for the day. The tents went up quickly, covering the pale *regh* with dark tents and sparks of cookfires. None of the tents was pitched *on* the Dove Road, or very close to the well, so there was one cluster of about twenty or so on the western side of the road, and another cluster about twice as big on the other side. Tiercel was surprised to see that the well had been left open to the sky. *Ikulas*, *shotors*, and a few goats wandered back and forth. When he saw a cloaked figure step out of one of the tents and come walking up the road toward him, he stopped in confusion, but as she approached, she pushed back the hood of her cloak so that he could see her face, and he saw it was Ciniran.

"Come, Tiercel. There's a fire at our tent, and food, and Harrier has gotten a cloak for you." She glanced at his clothing. "Perhaps they can be cleaned at least," she said, shaking her head.

Away from Saravasse's heat, the night had been cold enough to make him shiver. "But I don't—How can he—" He hadn't learned much about the Isvaieni during his stay in Abi'Abadshar, but their rules about charity were one thing that had been made very clear to him.

"This is a time of great change for the Isvaieni," Ciniran said, her voice solemn. "And the Blue Robes are above all custom. Come."

The tent she led him toward wasn't the same one they'd left when the storm had struck. This one was dun-colored instead of black, and the patterns of the carpets inside and in front—that was new—were different.

"Sit," Shaiara said. "There is water."

Tiercel sat down on the carpet and pulled off his *chadar*. It had been filthy ever since he'd fallen out of the sky and *bled* all over it, and it had only gotten dirtier each day since, and he couldn't decide whether Saravasse's run across the desert had blown all the dust out of the fabric or filled it with new dust. It felt odd to be sitting on a fine woven rug in the middle of nowhere, too. Shaiara dipped a mug into a barrel and handed it to him. The water was cold and fresh; it must have just come from the well.

"I don't know if they're going to go for it, but I asked," Harrier said, walking around from the back of the tent. "They're still arguing. Anipha's against it, Sathan's just trying to annoy her, Zanattar's making speeches about the Breaking of Tribes, and Liapha isn't saying one way or the other. There you are," he added, seeing Tiercel. "Is that blood all over your robe?"

Tiercel blinked at him warily. Harrier's mood seemed to have changed completely in the time it had taken Tiercel to walk a mile or so. "Uh . . . yeah. I think it's mine. I fell out of the sky, Har," he said, just in case Harrier had missed it the first time he'd mentioned it. "Bisochim saved my life. Uh . . . Zanattar's here?" he added.

Harrier grinned. “For the last ten days. The Lanzanur are one of the tribes in the group right behind us. Zanattar decided to ride up to tell me that as soon as we get to the Isvai, we’re all going *Demon-hunting*,” he said contemptuously.

“I, um . . . we are?”

“Use your head,” Harrier said reproachfully. He dropped into a sitting position with a sigh of exhaustion. “If we don’t hold all the rest of the arrows in common, parts of the line will be defenseless when we’re attacked again,” he added, apparently adding to the previous conversation for Tiercel’s benefit. “The Kadyastar hate the Barantar, the Barantar hate the Kamazan, and the Nalzindar . . . ?” He looked at Shaiara.

“The Nalzindar hate no one. But neither do we have any arrows,” Shaiara said dryly.

Harrier made an amused noise, and poured himself a mug of water.

“If you hate all of these people, why are you trying to save them?” Tiercel asked in frustration.

Harrier gave him a startled look. “I don’t hate them. Most of them. Mostly they’re just idiots. If you want to know why we’re riding with them, hey, it’s not like the three of us could exactly sneak out of Telinchechitl without anybody noticing after you left. And the grass was dead by noon. And—”

“Okay. Fine. You had a bunch of very good reasons for bringing all of them with you,” Tiercel said.

“You weren’t there,” Harrier said. There was a faint note of warning in his voice now. “And now that you *are* here, we have to decide what to do.”

Tiercel stifled another flare of resentment. He’d gone with Bisochim. Both he and Harrier had thought Bisochim might be crazy, but they’d been desperate. Harrier had expected him to be gone a day at most. He’d come back a fortnight later, and said he’d been attacked by Ahairan *in person*, and said he’d barely escaped with his life, and said he’d had to *walk* halfway across the Isvai, and all Harrier did was yell at him for not having walked to the Elven Lands instead. Even now Harrier hadn’t said that he was glad he’d survived, or had been worried that he hadn’t.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Bisochim?” Tiercel asked.

Harrier sighed. “I don’t know. I sent you to get help. You didn’t. Shut up,” he added, when Tiercel opened his mouth to protest. “Ahairan didn’t kill you, and didn’t taint you—she just set things up so that *if* Bisochim Heals Saravasse he’ll be Tainted. So Saravasse can’t fly, but Bisochim can still use her magic. Nobody can live at Telinchechitl. I’d figured Ahairan had gone off somewhere—Light Alone knows where—but last night we were attacked by Goblins. I think she sent them. I *also* think you still need to go and get help, and Saravasse is the fastest way.”

“We can’t just go and leave you here,” Tiercel said.

But Harrier wasn’t listening anymore. He’d gotten to his feet and was staring toward the north, frowning. “There shouldn’t be anything in the sky,” he said slowly.

Now Shaiara and Ciniran were standing and staring too. Tiercel got up and looked northward, but he couldn’t see anything. There was so much Coldfire in the sky over the camp that it was almost impossible to see the stars; the camp itself was lit, not as bright as day, but brighter than the brightest full moon could ever have lit it. Even Pelashia’s Veil was dim and faint, though at least it was visible—a broad white band against the blackness of the night sky. Automatically Tiercel’s eyes followed it, past the edge of the Coldfire, to the empty sky beyond. He couldn’t see anything, but somehow the sky looked . . . wrong.

He remembered when Harrier hadn’t been willing to even try to make Coldfire, and that his first attempts had always disappeared the moment his attention was elsewhere. Now there was so much of it that Tiercel couldn’t count the individual balls of glowing azure fog. He wondered, with desperate inappropriateness, if Armethalich in the Time of Mages had been lit this way at night. He knew he was only trying to distract himself from what might be coming. *Please don’t let it be Ahairan. Please.*

“Something flies there,” Shaiara said, her voice tight with dread. “Something large.”

When she said the words, suddenly Tiercel could see what she saw. Beyond the canopy of Coldfire, the stars were winking out and reappearing as something passed in front of them.

“How big—?” Harrier began, and without needing to ask Tiercel knew what he was asking. *How big was the creature that attacked Bisochim’s dragon?*

“As big as Saravasse,” Tiercel said. “Bisochim called it a Balwarta. It looked like a *jarrari* with wings.”

Harrier growled deep in his throat, a sound of anger and hopelessness. “Ciniran—Bisochim is up the road. Get him.” Ciniran ran into the tent for weapons. Harrier poured the last of the water in his mug onto the coals, extinguishing the cookfire with a hiss and a puff of steam. “Shaiara—”

“The children and the *ikulas* to the tents, the fires and lanterns doused—and we must drive as many *shotors* into the desert as we can,” she said. “Perhaps they are just hungry.”

Harrier nodded and Shaiara took off at a run. Ciniran came back again, her bow and quiver slung over her shoulder, carrying a saddle. “Go inside,” Harrier said to Tiercel.

“I—But I can help,” Tiercel protested.

“You can’t shoot a bow any more than I can, and nobody here will listen to you. *Go inside*,” Harrier repeated, and ran.

Yeah, but at least I can keep this whole camp from being lit up like Demon banquet! Tiercel thought angrily. He didn’t know how they’d gone from being partners in trying to stop the Dark from coming back to being almost enemies. He didn’t like it.

The sounds of fear grew slowly louder as the warning spread from their campsite, and all around him cookfires were being doused, but the globes of Coldfire still hung over the entire camp, making everything easy to see. Coldfire. MageLight. The same result. Maybe even the same spell. The High Magick had come from the Wild Magic. Even if Harrier had made them, Tiercel should be able to move them. He concentrated, just the way he did when he wanted to move one of his own globes of MageLight. It was harder than he’d thought it would be. For a moment he almost felt as if he’d touched something, and then a wave of nausea and dizziness made him stagger and fall to his knees. It was like a combination of the worst of the times when he’d tried to cast a spell without having the power for it and being next to Harrier or Bisochim when either of them cast a spell of the Wild Magic.

He was just getting ready to try again when he heard the screams.



HARRIER had spent most of the last fortnight complaining about the Isvaieni, if only in the privacy of his own mind. Good-for-nothing, lazy, childish, unreasonable, argumentative, unrealistic, disorganized, indecisive, incompetent.

Tonight he changed his mind.

From the moment he looked idly skyward and noticed the stars flickering to the time when the first Balwarta swooped low over the tents was barely two-thirds of a chime—if that. The camp was spread out over almost fifty hectares. There was no hope of carrying a warning to everyone in time. Yet at each tent he reached, Harrier discovered that all he had to do was name the danger and hurry on. Every tent held at least one man or woman who’d ridden with Zanattar. Behind him, fires were doused, lanterns quenched, children and hounds taken inside the tents, and from each tent, at least one person sprinted off into the night—armed with whatever weapons they could snatch up in seconds—to pass on the alarm. He saw a boy and girl who couldn’t be more than ten half-coax, half drag a grunting and protesting *shotor* toward the open desert. *Shotors* had a better notion of their rights than any dockyard magistrate. They knew the tents had been pitched, and so they saw no

reason to move.

He reached the edge of the tents. He didn't know if those Balwarta-things needed light to see them, but he knew the archers would need light to aim. He'd move the Coldfire out over the desert, then go back. It might help. He grabbed for the canopy of Coldfire to pull all the globes together to make a brighter single globe, but as he tried, he felt them resist.

Who—? What—? Why—? Harrier couldn't imagine any reason he couldn't move the Coldfire he'd made other than a spell, and he couldn't imagine any source for such a spell but Ahairan.

If Ahairan's here, we're dead.

She could kill everyone here and probably convince Bisochim she'd done it for their own good and Harrier still wasn't sure why she hadn't killed Bisochim already. He didn't want to think about the fact that Bisochim had conjured up a Demon without being Tainted and who knew what he might do next without being Tainted and if Bisochim wasn't Tainted, Harrier probably wouldn't know there was something wrong until the day he woke up dead and the world was filled with Demons and everybody else he knew was dead, too, just because *he'd been too stupid to kill somebody just to make sure*. He hauled at the Coldfire as hard as he could, felt a last resistance give way, and finally the pale globes of magic began to move at his command.

When the attack came, it was on the eastern edge of the camp—and Harrier was at the far southern edge, having veered that way through the tangle of tent-ropes and around the obstacles of kneeling shotors. In the distance, by the Coldfire's light, he saw two dark blurs drop from the sky. He stood where he was—though every instinct howled to him to run, to help—because he couldn't do that and shift the Coldfire both, and damn it, they needed light. He forced himself to block out the shouts and screams, the howling of the *ikulas*, the outcries of the Isvaieni as they raced across the camp toward the threat, the weird deep-voiced wailing of the panicked *shotors*. The Coldfire was swirling together now, cloud more than ball, and he *knew* that if he let go of it now it would simply vanish, and there was no moonlight. Somewhere at the back of his mind he could hear Tiercel's voice talking about all the parts of a spell: constructing it and empowering it and setting it so it wouldn't just dissolve when you were finished. He'd said "*Why don't you just do it?*" and Tiercel had answered, "*Because it isn't that easy.*"

Finally the Coldfire settled into something almost too bright to look at. With a sharp sigh of relief, Harrier released it again and ran toward the Balwarta. It was difficult to navigate because there were no clear streets set out between the tents, and the last thing he wanted was for the Wild Magic to *be helpful* and show him a clear route, because he found that enormously distracting. But as he worked his way eastward, he almost changed his mind. More than half of the tents were down—when the *shotors* had panicked and bolted, some of them had run through the tents trying to get away, because the Isvaieni had followed custom and simply settled their animals beside their tents for the night. *If we survive this, we have to start keeping them all in one place*, Harrier thought at the back of his mind.

He began to smell smoke and blood. When he got close, he could see that there were two Balwarta. One was on the ground, standing in the middle of three or four smashed tents, and the air was hazy with smoke. Its clubbed barbed tail was curved menacingly up over its back. The other Balwarta hovered in the air above it. The Isvaieni were shooting at both Balwarta. Once again—as when the Goblins had attacked—some of the Isvaieni were simply throwing themselves at the Balwarta as if they thought they were invulnerable. It wasn't working out very well, and Harrier didn't know why anybody wasn't trying to *stop* them. Some of the others—brave without being *crazy*—were trying to get close to the one on the ground with *awardans* or spears, but the arrows bounced off the armor of the Balwartas' upper bodies, and nobody could get close enough with a sword. Not and live, anyway. The claws—and the tail—were obviously deadly.

Even if they couldn't kill it, the Isvaieni were trying to lure the one on the ground away from the wreckage. Harrier thought there must be people still trapped in some of the collapsed tents, and maybe they were even still alive. Not for long, though. The tent-fabric was already smoldering, and if a fire got started, anybody trapped would be burned alive. Worse—because more deadly—a fire could spread through the whole camp carried by wind-borne sparks. Everything was tinder-dry, and there was only one source of water.

The Balwarta both seemed confused by the screaming, waving Isvaieni. Or maybe they were waiting for someone to tell them what to do next. *We're going to die here*, Harrier heard himself think very clearly, and sometimes in the past when he'd thought that he'd been disbelieving, and sometimes he'd been resigned, and sometimes he'd been terrified, but right now, for some reason, he was really *annoyed*. He saw Shaiara among the archers, and pointed at the Balwarta on the ground. Then he turned toward the one hovering in the air and Called Fire onto its wings.

At the first touch of his spell, it rose into the mass of Coldfire that filled the sky. Now he couldn't see it, but that didn't matter. He had just long enough to worry that it wasn't going to work, to wonder when he'd gotten the idea that *setting living things on fire* was a good idea, when it came falling back down through the glowing canopy. It beat the naked vanes of its burned wings wildly as it fell, as if it thought it could still fly, and Harrier drew a sharp breath, thinking about Bisochim's dragon. How high up had she been when she fell?

The Balwarta hit the *regh* a few hundred yards away. Harrier felt the ground shake with the impact; because of the noise from the camp, it was as if it happened in silence, even though it didn't. He was sure the Balwarta was dead, but the fall didn't seem to have even dazed it. It flipped over from its back onto its legs and began to scuttle forward, its tail curled high over its back. Harrier drew his swords, running out on the *regh* so the battle wouldn't take place inside the camp. There was a slin chance. Strike behind the huge murderous claws—if he could—avoid the mandibles—if he could—hope its blood wasn't poisonous and that it couldn't jab him with its tail before he could get out of the way . . .

If he could.

He wasn't thinking past the moment when the Balwarta would be within range. To think was to be doing something other than reacting to your opponent's attacks; that was a hard-won lesson Harrier did not intend to forget now. But it was still yards away when there was a sound like tearing cloth and a flash of light so bright he shouted in alarm, bringing his arms up instinctively to shield his face. With the light came heat as abrupt as if someone had suddenly opened the door of a furnace, and the hideous stench of burning . . . something.

He couldn't see. He was blinded by the intense light of a lightning strike where none should have—could have—been. But even while he was still trying to stumble back out of the way of the Balwarta's attack—in case it might still be coming—he heard a full-throated roar of fury, loud enough to cut through the shouts and screams: "*Get out of my way!*" He didn't need sight to turn in Saravasse's direction.

Wait. No. Wait. Something not even as strong as his earlier hunch that had let him know Bisochim was coming nagged at him now. Something he'd seen. Something he'd forgotten.

If he could just hear himself *think*, he could remember what it was—but they could probably hear the noise from the camp all the way in Armethalich right now. Harrier sheathed his swords and desperately rubbed at his eyes, but all he could see was light. Too much and not enough.

"Harrier—come! We must move—now—" He'd sensed Shaiara's approach even before she spoke. Still unable to see, he reached slowly out toward her. Shaiara grabbed his hand and pulled. "*Come.*"

"No. Shaiara, tell me what you see," he said urgently.

"Saravasse attacks the flying *jarrari*—"

"In the sky. Look in the sky." He could feel Isvaieni all around him, running out into the desert—away from the fight—but he held Shaiara still.

"The Coldfire is gone. The sky, I . . ." Her voice stopped, and the silence was all the answer he needed.

Three of them. There were three of them.

“Find Bisochim. He has to be nearby,” he said quietly. He closed his eyes. His eyesight was coming back—he could tell—but he wouldn’t have decent night vision for at least a chime. Too late.

They didn’t have Knight-Mages in the Selken Isles. Harrier would never have stood in a Selken Shrine and pledged his skill to the Sword-Giver and the Lady of Battles, but the Telchi had trained him as if he would’ve. And so he’d stood on the practice sand blindfolded and done his best to defend himself against what he couldn’t see. “*Let your skin be your eyes,*” the Telchi had told him. “*Your eyes will lie. Your skin will not.*” The Telchi had never meant his training to serve for this—locating a target a mile or more away and in the sky—but it had to. *It’s out there, he told himself. Find it.*

Night and desert cold and *look at all I’ve done for you already* and he hardly knew that he was praying, and the smell of smoke and what had to be burning Balwarta was coming from somewhere in front of him and *if the Dark wins there won’t be anyone left to do whatever it is you want us to do*, he told the Wild Magic, and screaming and sobbing and *ikulas* howling in the distance and *I’ll pay your Price just tell me what it is* and the shouts of people running across the *regh* and *shotors* bawling and *I need to get it out of the sky so Bisochim can kill it, I just need to slow it down that’s all* and he realized there were no sounds of fighting behind him now and he hoped that Saravasse had won and he realized that if she hadn’t Bisochim was already dead and then:

There.

He couldn’t have described the feeling. It didn’t go into words—not for him. He’d never been good with words. He just knew because he knew, and there was no time to stop to hope or wonder if he was right. He struck at his target with all the anger inside him—the hatred for every senseless death, for every moment of cruelty and sacrifice and loss that had led him to stand here tonight and realize that it might not be today or tomorrow or even a sennight from now, but he was going to die trying to protect the people who’d taken Macenor’s Telchi from him—who’d taken his own *life* from him. Harrier wasn’t even dead, and it seemed petty to resent that so much more than everything else they’d done—to resent anything on his own behalf when the stakes were so high—but he did, and he poured that rage into his spell until the energy he’d sent into it brought him to his knees.

Harrier realized after a few moments that he was staring at his hands, and that he could see them clearly. He got to his feet, looking warily toward the sky—he didn’t want to be looking into a lightning bolt again tonight.

And then the sound began.

At first he wasn’t sure what it was. It almost sounded like cries for help, but then the sound grew louder as it was taken up by more people—behind him, in front of him, people everywhere around him—and suddenly he could tell what it was.

Cheering.

They’d won.



THE third Balwarta just dropped out of the sky right before Shaiara reached Bisochim, dead before it hit the ground. Bisochim had killed the one whose wings Harrier had burned, and Saravasse had killed the other one.

There were more dead.

Searching the wreckage wasn’t easy. Anything soiled with either venom or ichor couldn’t be touched with bare hands. Several falconry gloves had been sacrificed to the task—the need to find trapped survivors was urgent. There weren’t many. Harrier tried not to look when the dead were taken from the wreckage. Most of the dead were children. The lucky ones had been smothered.

“You would honor them did you aid them in laying the dead upon the sand,” Shaiara said quietly.

“What do I do?” he asked. He knew he sounded far more frightened than he had when he’d faced two Balwarta, but this was the first time he’d seen dead bodies since Tarnatha’Iteru. He remembered thinking once that nothing could be too horrible for the people who’d destroyed the city and killed Macenor’s Telchi. But these were children. He found himself studying the faces of the Isvaieni, both those working through the wreckage and those gathered to watch. None of them looked like bereaved parents or husbands or brothers. Harrier didn’t think it could be possible that they didn’t care, but it was as if just when he thought he was starting to understand the Isvaieni, he’d been reminded that he never would.

The dead were all Barantar; the Balwarta had landed on the Barantar tents. As they’d been recovered, each body had been laid on a carpet brought for that purpose. Each was stripped of all clothing—not to save it, because the Barantar performing that task would cut and tear the cloth if they must—but for custom’s sake. At last the body was arranged carefully, but without formality.

“Walk with them when they go. That is all. I do not know what more you may do in the Cold North,” Shaiara said, and Harrier nodded.

Finally it was time to go. Harrier stepped to the head of the carpet, signifying that he would walk with them. Sathan took his place beside him. Four Isvaieni gripped each end of the carpet. They all began to walk. Half a mile out into the desert they stopped and set the carpet down.

Harrier thought of funerals in Armethalieh. Of candles and incense and the Preceptor saying that the Loved One had become “one with the Eternal Light.” Down by the Docks they always added “and Great Ocean, too,” and the Temple Preceptor frowned at them but didn’t say anything, and he’d never yet refused to accept a body for burning just because the seafaring families chose to remember the Great Power that shaped their lives in their time of loss. And then afterward they’d add a new name to the memorial tablet in their House Shrines and life would go on. Here they simply lifted the bodies from the carpet and set them on the *regh* and rolled up the carpet and walked back.



BECAUSE of the Balwarta’s contamination, the Isvaieni had to burn eight tents and all their contents, which meant more losses for Sathan. He stalked over to Liapha’s tent to demand that she replace them, saying that Harrier had said she had to. That meant Rinurta came and got Harrier, who’d been overseeing the burning, and brought him to Liapha’s tent. Harrier found himself stumbling through an explanation of the fact that he’d said they should hold *arrows* in common, not tents, getting angrier and more frustrated all the time. By the time Zanattar and Anipha showed up, Harrier had just about decided that Liapha entertained herself with loud screaming fights and none of her own people were willing to oblige her any longer.

“Thieving *pakh!*” Anipha snarled when she saw Sathan. “Two-legged *barghus!* You would suck the water from a shadow if you could! You only wished to come away from Telinchechitl so quickly to claim the best grazing in the Isvai for your herds! Where are your herds now, thief of every tent?”

“I, a thief? *I?*” Sathan cried. The *ikulas* sitting at Liapha’s feet raised their heads in interest. “When it is known from Kannatha Well to Lomazuntur Oasis that the Kamazan survive from Gathering to Gathering upon *charity*—”

Anipha’s answer was a wordless shriek of rage.

“Does anybody in this tent happen to remember that we were attacked by a Demon tonight?” Harrier bellowed at the top of his lungs. His voice was loud enough to shock everyone there to stillness: he’d learned to make himself heard over the racket of Armethalieh Port.

“Just so,” Liapha said happily into the stunned silence. She beamed at Harrier. He restrained himself from glowering at her with an effort. She was Shaiara’s grandmother.

“You,” Harrier said, turning to Sathan. “No tents. You still have more tents than anyone else here. You,” he said, turning to Anipha. “I don’t care what you think of Sathan. We are all going to be *civil* to each other. I’m not finished with you,” he said, as Sathan was leaving.

“You do not command me, Blue Robe,” Sathan said icily.

“No,” Harrier agreed. “But the Balwarta weren’t the only things that knocked down tents tonight. *Shotors* did a lot of damage. Every time we’re attacked, they’re going to bolt. We need to keep all the *shotors* together, someplace where, if they get spooked and run, they can’t do too much damage.”

“I shall not give my *shotors* into your hands so that you can *steal them*,” Sathan said hotly.

“Trust a Barantar to think first of theft!” Anipha spat.

Harrier sat down beside Liapha, because if he didn’t, he was going to *hit somebody*, and Anipha was closer than Sathan was. One of the *ikulas* moved over to rest its chin on his knee. He stroked its silky head absently.

“How shall any steal the *shotors* of *Ummara* Sathan here upon the Forge of the Sun?” Zanattar asked. “This plan is a good plan. The Lanzanur shall place their *shotors* where Harrier Blue Robe desires.” He smiled at Sathan, a flash of white teeth in a black beard. “And so shall many of the Barantar.”

Harrier was fairly sure that Sathan didn’t want to hear that his people would take orders from somebody else, even though the Isvaieni didn’t exactly take orders from their *Ummarai* either. He was still trying to decide whether Zanattar’s announcement did more harm than good when Liapha spoke again.

“Anyone so foolish that he cannot find his own *shotors* in a herd does not deserve to have any,” she announced, as if stating the obvious.

“The *Kamazan* will have no difficulty in doing so,” Anipha said disdainfully.

“Then all is settled!” Liapha said brightly.

At that point, Sathan could hardly say it wasn’t.



“STOP trying to drag her,” Tiercel said. “She’s stronger than you are and almost as stubborn.”

“You’re alive. I looked for you but I couldn’t find you.” Harrier tossed him the cow-*shotor*’s lead-rope. “*You* make her move, then, because until she does, none of the rest of them will.”

“That’s because she’s the leader,” Tiercel said, answering the last comment first. “Yeah. I was trying to dispel the Coldfire, but it didn’t work out. By the time I was steady on my feet again there were a bunch of people telling me not to go to the eastern side of the camp, and then I started helping Hadozir gather the *shotors* as Bisochim Called them in off the desert.” He watched Harrier sort through his remarks and discard most of them as random noise, just as Harrier usually did. He wondered which of them Harrier would think was important.

“The next time you decide to dispel something of mine while I’m trying to gather it together, tell me first so I can *hit* you. I thought the trouble I was having with it meant that Ahairan was nearby,” Harrier said.

“Uh—” *Oh*. That *one*. It hadn’t occurred to Tiercel that he wouldn’t be doing Harrier a favor. “It’s, uh, going to be dawn soon,” he said. He patted the cow-*shotor* reassuringly on the shoulder, telling her that no, of course they weren’t expecting her to go anywhere at this time of day, just a few yards across the camp and then she and all her *shotor*-friends could lie down again, really. She uttered a deep groan of surrender and took a long lurching step forward.

“*Finally*,” Harrier said with a sigh. He walked beside Tiercel as Tiercel led the string of *shotors* to their new resting place. “Well, we can’t run, and Light knows we can’t fight. We’ve lost almost fifty people in the last two nights. I don’t even want to try to count the number of sheep, goats, *shotors*, *khalbes*, *ikulas*, and falcons that are dead. And there are probably things we haven’t seen yet just waiting to attack us. Although Ahairan hasn’t been very efficient so far. If *I* were leading the Armies of the Dark, we’d all be dead by now.”

Tiercel shuddered. “Don’t say that.” He’d told Bisochim that Harrier would never serve Ahairan willingly and go over to the Dark. He’d told Bisochim that *he* was the only one who wanted something so much that he could be tempted to bargain with the Dark, but that wasn’t really true, was it? Harrier had family in Armethalieh. “Although maybe not,” he said, distracted by a new thought.

“I would *too*,” Harrier insisted.

“No, I mean . . . Look, you know I read a lot about the, uh, the *last* Endarkened War,” Tiercel said tentatively. They’d reached the place where Harrier had decided to gather the *shotors*, and seeing all the other *shotors* already lying down, the cow-*shotor* shook her lead-rope loose from Tiercel’s hand with an irritated grunt and trotted off to find a place to lie down. The others behind her followed.

“And I know I said I didn’t care, Tyr, but that was when I wasn’t going to be fighting the *next* Endarkened war, and don’t tell me that Ahairan isn’t an Endarkened, because trust me, this is *not* the time,” Harrier said in a rush before Tiercel could say anything else.

Tiercel shook his head. Ahairan was an entirely different *kind* of Demon, but he didn’t want to start an argument about language with Harrier in the middle of explaining something else important. “It’s just that the—Yeah, okay, all right, the *Endarkened* had a lot of what the histories call ‘client races’ fighting for them. But just about all of those client races—Stone Giants and Frost Giants and Ice-Trolls and Coldwargs and Deathwings and, oh, a lot more—were creatures of dark, or cold, or dark *and* cold.”

“‘Dark’ as in—?” Harrier asked slowly.

“When the sun goes down, Har,” Tiercel said patiently.

“Yeah, well, it does that here every night,” Harrier said, sounding irritated.

“Yes,” Tiercel said. “But it’s also *hot* here, at least during the day—and they were *Frost* Giants and *Ice*-Trolls and *Coldwargs* and I don’t think that even in the, um, the Great War—the one before Kellen’s War—there were a lot of battles fought down here.”

“Don’t you *know*?” Harrier demanded in exasperation.

“No,” Tiercel said quietly. “There really wasn’t a lot of time for me to read those books in Karahelanderialigor. And I don’t think anything much older than the Flowering War is written about in any way I could read it.”

“Sorry,” Harrier said wearily. “I’m sorry. It’s been . . . a long night. And I think we’re out of time. We need to decide what we’re going to do.” It was almost sunrise. The wind was rising, and the sky was shading from black to the darkest possible shade of blue.

“You want to decide *right now*?” Tiercel asked. He didn’t want to complain, but he was exhausted, and he’d been awake since dawn yesterday, and he hadn’t known what to do about Ahairan *then*.

“No,” Harrier said. “Right now I want to pretend tonight never happened.” They turned and began to walk back in the direction of the tent. “You know,” Harrier said, “I used to think, back when we were on the road looking for the Lake of Fire, that everything would be so much easier for us if only *we* had an army just like Kellen and Jermayan did. And just look at us now.”

He gestured and Tiercel looked. All around them the Isvaieni were rolling up carpets and making sure that cookfires were thoroughly out and folding down their tents against the coming day. "Yeah," Tiercel said.

"There are times I wish the Light wasn't so hasty in granting wishes," Harrier said.



Bitter Harvest

ON THE SANDS of the Isvai, Ahairan played her games of flesh and form. In the days since she had come to the World of Form, she had discovered its limitations . . . and hers. If her flesh-prison was not to exist in a bespelled sleep, it must be constantly tended, and flesh required grosser food than spirit did. Pain and death nourished her magic, but not her body. She would not die if *it* did—for an Elemental Spirit could not die—but she would be trapped within the husk as it rotted away, and once she slipped free of it, she would be diminished in power. Greatly diminished.

It should have been the task of He-Who-Had-Called-Her to tend this body. He had crafted it in an image that—Ahairan knew—he found pleasing. Yet he had spurned it. And her.

Once he bowed down to her, she would grant him immortality so that he might spend a thousand centuries regretting that lapse in judgment.

But he must swear fealty to her first, so that she could fully claim this world. For herself, for her children—and for her kindred, whom she would liberate from the cold dark place from which she had been released once her power was great enough. They could sweep across the face of the land, bodiless, feeding upon the offerings her slaves would render up—or they might choose instead to take forms of flesh such as Ahairan and her children would be able to create through their power. But they would be free.

But before all these things might take place, Ahairan must win that which should have been hers by right, and so she needed minions to do her will. He-Who-Is was the wellspring of all Darkness, and He-Who-Is would never return to the World of Form, but the creatures Darkness had fashioned had not all passed away when their masters and makers had been destroyed. Some slept, waiting only to be awakened. Some had lost their physical reality but their possibility remained, and so they could be evoked anew. Most of them were creatures of northern darkness and northern cold, but she had Summoned them forth nevertheless—the Deathwings from their sleep in caverns in the depths of the most remote mountains—the Coldwargs from their ancient ice-bound hunting grounds far from the lands of Men or Elves—the *duergar*, cousins to the long-vanished Ice-Trolls, from the bowels of the earth where few creatures Dark or Light ventured—only to see these last remnants of the glory of Shadow Mountain fail and die as they attempted to answer her call. Of all the creatures of the Darkness from the ancient days of Shadow Mountain, none but the Goblins, the Balwarta, the Salaawah were yet hers to command. She must have more—others—to do her will here in the hot brightness of the southern lands.

Her power was great enough to compel the will of every creature that made its home upon the sand, to twist their forms into vessels of Darkness just as He-Who-Is had once remade the firstborn of the Light's children in His own image. She had found that the Isvai was filled with Life waiting to be rendered *atish'ban* at her touch—that was good, for Life was a fragile thing, and to craft *atish'ban* creatures able to survive more than a short period was time-consuming and delicate work. She destroyed far more Life than she managed to re-create in the image of Darkness, and though their deaths fed her—for Life's suffering fed Ahairan's insatiable hunger in a far more satisfying way than the physical substance she must now also ingest—the fact she was both forced to work and that she constantly failed at these necessary tasks also fed her frustration and her rage. This work should have been the duty of He-Who-Had-Called-Her—he should have been her servant already, his magic at her disposal, enabling her to breed up the first of a new race of Demons while he, her humble consort-prince, consolidated her empire and saw to her comfort and entertainment.

The more she was forced to toil, the greater grew Ahairan's anger at how badly she had been treated. He whom she would have made King of Men had been willful, and mad, and had spurned her, leaving her to make her way alone as best she could, turning her vast powers to these most menial of tasks. Yet they were labors that must be performed, for in their fall, the children of He-Who-Is had left Ahairan few servants capable of aiding her to claim her dominion—and force alone could not gain Ahairan what she must have.

Yet within only a few sennights, Ahairan had set such events into motion that the capitulation of He-Who-Had-Called-Her could be a matter of only a few days more at most. She had trapped him—and she had baited that trap in a way that he would find impossible to resist, for had not his desire to preserve his dragon from death been the means by which she had secured her escape into the Time-Bound realm initially? She had prepared *atish'ban* to harry those others whom he might also wish to protect, proving to him her power. She had prepared for herself a stronghold in the depths of the desert, both to shelter her flesh-form and wherein she could preserve those of her creatures she did not wish to use up until she had need of them. All she need do now was claim victory and collect the last of her servants.

“Come to me!” Ahairan shouted into the desert wind. “The day of my victory is at hand, and I claim your fealty!”

She stood upon the roof of a tower that rose hundreds of feet above the desert floor. It was made of glass, but not by magic: she had taken the *tiehaan*, a tiny creature of the desert verge that built structures to its own purpose, and rendered uncounted hordes of them *atish'ban*. So changed, they made edifices not of mud, but of glass, and died by the incalculable thousands of their work. The sand around the foot of the crystal tower was heaped with their glittering ebony corpses. Their bodies made a faint clicking sound as the wind stirred them.

Suddenly the Firecrown was there. “You are not yet victorious,” it answered. The glass beneath its feet crackled with heat and the wind that blew at this great height struck flames from its pale red hair.

“I shall be!” Ahairan said defiantly, tossing her head. “I shall scour the people of He-Who-Has-Called-Me from the face of the desert as the Sandwind scours lichen from the rock. Each night as they set forth he will know that when the sun rises they will be fewer. I shall wring their lives from his grasp no matter how hungrily he clutches at them, and all the spells of He-Who-Has-Called-Me will not prevail against my power. Who can he turn to for their salvation but me?”

“You are not yet victorious,” the Firecrown repeated.

“I do not need him!” Ahairan cried, angry now. She tossed her head, and the wind blew the long strands of her cherry-black hair across her shoulder. She brushed them back impatiently. “I do not need any of them! You said to me that I could not journey northward to find Wildmages garbed in robes of blue—but you lied to me, for I have gone north to Akazidas'Iteru and passed within its gates, and there I found a Wildmage in a robe of blue, and I have brought him here!”

“And will he serve you?” the Firecrown asked calmly.

“If he does not, I will slay all those who share his blood. He will not refuse me,” Ahairan answered, her anger fading into triumph. “Come forth, Blue Robe!”

She stretched out her hand. There was a sound of struggle and muffled groans, then a young man in the blue robes of a southern Wildmage came staggering up the steps to the tower roof, moving as if he struggled against compulsion. His blue robes were torn and filthy, and his face was bloody and battered. He strained to hurl himself over the edge of the tower, and when he could not, he glared defiantly at Ahairan.

“Darkspawn! You threaten my kin, and your words are as the clamor of a barking dog. My mother is of the Binrazan—My father a trader of Sedullu’Iteru. More than a wheel of seasons ago the Wild Magic said to me that I must seek them out and go with them to Armethalieh to see them settled there, and so I did. And did they all stand here with me down to my sister’s youngest child, you might slay them all before my eyes and still I would not serve a Demon of the Dark!”

“Sedullu’Iteru is dust and ash,” Ahairan said callously. “Kanash, will you see the tents of the Binrazan suffer the same fate?”

Kanash smiled, and spat bloodily at her feet. “If you can, Demon. If you cannot force me to kneel to you, your power is not great.”

Suddenly Kanash screamed in agony and fell to the floor. He clutched at his thighs, writhing against the sun-hot crystal roof, and where his hands pressed the fabric of his robes against his flesh, blood seeped through and stained the blue fabric dark.

“Oh, I can force you to kneel, Kanash,” Ahairan said triumphantly. “To crawl, and to grovel, and to pray to me for death. And all I ask is that you serve me. It is such a small thing. Do this, and I will grant you great gifts—the lives of the Binrazan and any others you ask. I promise you this.”

“You speak in the tongue of lies,” Kanash gasped, though his voice was hoarse and shaking with pain. “Never shall I serve you—*never!*”

He howled in anguish as she attempted to force him to stand. Again and again he floundered convulsively as his body attempted to obey her commands and the splintered bone of his legs would not support him. As Ahairan continued to force his limbs to make the effort, blood began to pool on the roof beneath him.

“Do as I command!” she screamed in frustration. Bisochim had defied and humiliated her as the Firecrown watched, and now a second Wildmage was resisting her commands as the Firecrown looked on. It infuriated her. “*Do as I command!*”

Beyond speech now, Kanash could only shake his head. *No. Never.*

With a last shriek of fury, Ahairan swept out her arm. Kanash’s body gave a convulsive shudder. If it was Ahairan’s intention to force him to throw himself off the tower, no compulsion was required—freed of her control, Kanash dragged himself swiftly to the edge of the tower, sliding through his own blood, and pulled himself quickly over the edge. He fell to his death in utter silence.

“You are not yet victorious,” the Firecrown said for the third time, its voice still maddeningly calm and dispassionate. “You have held two wielders of the Wild Magic in your thrall, and you could not corrupt them, either through rich prizes or by duress. Shall I believe that you are powerful enough to claim this world?”

“Yes!” Ahairan hissed furiously. “For I shall enthrall not only He-Who-Has-Called-Me, but the Fire-Crowned Boy and his companion as well! All three will serve me! Look to yourself, Firecrown, lest when that day comes—as it shall—I no longer desire our alliance.”

“It would be foolish of me indeed not to seek alliance with the power that will hold the future of this land in its grasp,” the Firecrown answered. “Nor should I wish to place my power in the service of any purpose that did not hasten that supremacy. Truly, there is no creature who would doubt that your passions burn as ardently as the flame from which you sprang. And my own nature is fire.”

“It is true that you can claim no kinship with the race whose battles caused the death of your worshipers,” Ahairan answered grandly. “When I summon you again, you must be prepared to give to me all that you have promised.”

“I accept the terms you now propose, and in token of that gift I tell you this: upon the day that our bargain is fulfilled will come an end to many things,” the Firecrown said. “Yet if neither you nor I may die, the ending I speak of can be neither yours nor mine.”

Before the last syllable of its words had faded to silence, the Firecrown had also vanished, as a flame of fire will vanish, blown to extinction by the desert wind.



“I FIGURE that we have three choices right now,” Harrier said. “One’s impossible, two’s useless, and three, well, three’s impossible too, but at least it’ll take longer.”

The four of them were sitting under the awning in front of Shaiara’s tent in the brief cool desert twilight. Tiercel’s clothes were clean now—although as Harrier had pointed out with cheerful gruesomeness, not even his Ma could get bloodstains that old out of wool and linen. Tiercel didn’t particularly care, as long as they were clean.

It was the evening after the Balwarta attack. The *Ummarai* had agreed to stay here and await the rest of the Isvaieni before moving further north. Now that Bisochim had rejoined them, there was no reason for all the Isvaieni not to travel together, and even Harrier had to agree it would be safer if all of them had magical protection if Ahairan was going to start attacking them, but no one had made any decisions beyond that. In the distance, the four of them could hear Anipha and Sathan shouting about goats. Bisochim and Sarvasse were . . . not exactly nowhere to be seen, but certainly nowhere nearby.

Shaiara made an exasperated noise and Tiercel was startled into laughter. “Yeah, I can see now why you wanted us to come up with ideas for what to do next before you tried to get everybody else to go along with them,” he said. “Okay, what’s number one?”

“We trap Ahairan here in the south and kill her,” Harrier said blandly. Tiercel shook his head wordlessly and gestured for Harrier to continue. “Two, you and I kill Bisochim and ourselves. You’ve said that according to Sarvasse, Ahairan wants you or Bisochim or me to *do stuff* with. I don’t know about him—don’t look at me like that; I *still* think he’s crazy—but I’m pretty sure about you, and considering the fact that just being within a couple of miles of Ahairan makes me want to puke, that’s out. If we’re all dead, Ahairan will probably leave the Isvai—although she’ll probably kill all the Isvaieni before she goes. And that still doesn’t do much about stopping her, or warning anybody, or getting help from the Elves.”

“Do you not have any *sensible* plans?” Shaiara demanded irritably.

“No,” Harrier said simply. “My third plan is for all of us to head north and see how many of us get to Armethalieh alive.”

Tiercel stared at Harrier for a very long time, willing him to say something else. He didn’t. “This—*this* is your *plan*?” he finally sputtered. “It took us a fortnight just to get back here—and I don’t even know where we were! The Isvai is—It’s—It’s *big!* And it’s *dry!* And it’s full of *sand!* And once you get across it, you still have a moonturn on the Trade Road before you reach Armethalieh!”

“Somebody needs to trap Ahairan so somebody can kill her eventually. That means Elven Mages. I don’t know if Sarvasse can even get through Pelashia’s Veil with Ahairan’s spell on her, and the Veiled Lands are a long way away. Armethalieh’s closer. If we warn them, Chief Magistrate Vaunnel can get a message to Vairindiel Elvenqueen,” Harrier said reasonably.

“So you’re planning to *walk* there with ten thousand Isvaieni? That’s a really stupid plan,” Tiercel blurted out.

“Well, I thought of taking them all to Karahelanderialigor, but that’s even farther away and they can’t get through Pelashia’s Veil either,” Harrier said. “Come on, Tyr. I know it’s a really stupid plan. I don’t have a better one. Your turn.”

Tiercel got to his feet and began to pace. “We could—We could all just go to Abi’Abadshar and stay there. It’s warded—remember, Bisochim couldn’t find the Nazindar there—and it’s big. We could—”

“Wait to die,” Shaiara said, cutting him off sharply. “Think you that the resources of the Demon City are infinite? I tell you plainly: they are not. Nor is there forage for the herds and the flocks in the desert above. Have you not heeded the words of the *Ummarai*? Do you not remember *why* the String of Pearls fell?”

“Bisochim sent the Young Hunters out into the desert to look for you,” Harrier said slowly. “Because the tribes were fighting with each other in Telinchechitl.”

Shaiara didn't say anything else. She didn't have to. The Isvaieni would be packed more closely together in Abi'Abadshar than they'd been at Telinchechitl—and not even in a place they could see the sky, but underground, in a place utterly unnatural and even frightening.

But if you went there it would only have to be for a few sennights—a moonturn at most—and then Bisochim and I would be back with help. Tiercel didn't bother to say the words aloud. Sennights? Moonturns? The Isvaieni would starve—if they didn't all kill each other first. “Well I—look. What if—what if someone other than Bisochim Heals Saravasse so she can fly to Karahelanderialigor—and we—and we kill them afterward before they do something Tainted?” he said desperately.

Shaiara made a sound of pure exasperation.

“Good plan,” Harrier said, after almost a minute of silence. “Of course, you don't know any Healing spells and you couldn't use them if you did, so . . . that would be me.”

Tiercel turned toward Harrier, his mouth dropping open in horror. He hadn't thought that far ahead. He hadn't *thought* at all past wanting another choice, one that actually had a chance of *success*. Getting to Armethalieh would take moonturns. Ahairan wouldn't just sit back and *watch*.

Shaiara reached out and slapped Harrier across the back of the head. Hard. “This is a foolish plan!” she snapped. “Who among us can slay a Knight-Mage? And what of those who lend energy to the healing of such a great creature? Are they to live in thrall to the Demon as well?”

“Yeah, all right—ow—we'll think of something else,” Harrier said, rubbing the back of his head.



BUT no matter how hard they'd tried, they couldn't. Bisochim was their only real defense against Ahairan and the things she could send against them. If Bisochim left with Saravasse in order to carry a warning to Armethalieh, thousands of people would almost certainly die. Even if Harrier or Tiercel was willing to try to talk him into it, it was clear he wouldn't listen. Bisochim felt he had betrayed the Isvaieni too utterly to be willing to abandon them again, especially when he could see that Ahairan had begun attacking them directly. From the night the Goblins attacked them, Ahairan's attacks never stopped. Plagues of insects—*barghusi* and *khazdara* and *kintibaz* and *jarrari*—joined the attacks by Goblins and Balwarta. The common ones were bad enough—northern fleas and ants were pale imitations of southern *barghusi* and *kintibaz*, and there was nothing in the north like *khazdara* or *jarrari* at all. And now Ahairan had created *atish'ban* versions that were a thousand times worse. The *atish'ban-jarrari* were tiny, and despite that, could kill with a single sting; and the bites of the *atish'ban-barghusi* maddened humans and animals alike. Those *atish'ban* insects that didn't simply eat their supplies, spoiled any they could reach.

Her attacks never did more than kill a few people each time—but that was enough to let the Isvaieni know that she could kill far more if she chose. Soon it was clear to everyone—even Sathan—that the return to the Isvai could not be the return to the familiar home that the Isvaieni had yearned for during their time at Telinchechitl, but must be the start of a longer and even more perilous journey.

Shaiara had meant to bring the Nazindar from Abi'Abadshar in order to return to the Isvai—it was the reason the Isvaieni had chosen to leave Telinchechitl, after all. But by the time hundreds of Isvaieni had become thousands, and the vast exodus at last moved northward to reach her departure-point, the *Ummarai* had considered their situation and decided that Abi'Abadshar must become a refuge for at least *some* of the Isvaieni. If Ahairan meant to slaughter them ruthlessly, at least the most helpless of them could be protected.

And so, as The Fortress Of The Crowned Horns had been for Elvenkind so very long ago, Abi'Abadshar became a refuge for both the children and the children-to-be of the Isvaieni.

Through Tiercel's intervention with Saravasse, Bisochim was convinced to escort the caravan there. But before it could depart, the tribes had to decide who would go, and that was a difficult process. In the Isvai, childhood was brief, and the years when an Isvaieni child played among the tents—free and heedless with no task to do—could be counted upon the fingers of one hand. Harrier was horrified to discover that children as young as twelve were expected—and expecting—to stay. Anipha's oldest son Bilbin had seen thirteen Gatherings of the Tribes (meaning, as Harrier figured out with only a little work, that Bilbin was thirteen), and she wasn't sending him to Abi'Abadshar.

“How should I?” Anipha said, “When every archer and spearman will be needed to defend the tents of the Kamazan. And Bilbin is favored of Sand and Star, Harrier, for he rode with Zanattar upon all his battles and took not a single wound.”

After that, Harrier had nothing else to say to her. He'd simply walked away. There was nothing he *could* say.

Tiercel tried, of course. He wanted to convince the Isvaieni to at least raise the age of “adulthood” to fifteen, since in Armethalieh, fifteen was still the age at which boys and girls were apprenticed in many crafts and professions. It was Shaiara who stopped him.

“How many hundreds—thousands—would you add to the burden Abi'Abadshar must bear, Tiercel?” she asked him gently. “Marap has learned to make the hidden gardens feed us, but can you say how long it must feed . . . so many?”

“No,” Tiercel said, hanging his head. “I can't, Shaiara.”

“Then leave us to do what we must,” she answered. “This parting is a hard one.”

More quickly than Harrier actually expected, the division of children and pregnant women from those who would continue onward to the Isvai—and Armethalieh—was made. There were fewer pregnant women than he would have expected. At sunset the party gathered together to depart; nearly a tenth of the Isvaieni people. The *shotors* that they rode would remain with them in Abi'Abadshar, but there would be no difficulty in feeding them. The animals would be slaughtered almost immediately, their meat preserved in a dozen ways, in order to feed the new influx of the city's inhabitants.

It was six days to Abi'Abadshar and six days back. Shaiara and Ciniran accompanied Bisochim and Saravasse on the journey. Without Shaiara to speak for Bisochim, the Nazindar in Abi'Abadshar would never believe he was not Bisochim Shadow-Touched. And Shaiara still meant to return with all the adult Nazindar that the city held.

It was a fortnight before Harrier saw Shaiara again. Upon her return, Shaiara said that the only thing that had gained them admittance to the city was Saravasse's injury. Seeing it, Marap had been unable to convince herself that Bisochim could possibly be Shadow-Touched, for if he were, he would certainly have Healed Saravasse. Shaiara returned with twenty Nazindar. She'd brought Tanjel with her. Tanjel was twelve. When Bisochim, Saravasse, and the Nazindar rejoined them, they continued north.

That all of them went and returned safely was a miracle. It was the last miracle the Isvaieni would receive.

Bisochim's spells could ward the caravan from Goblins, and his thunderbolts could slay Balwarta. But with each attack Bisochim thwarted, Ahairan learned. The Isvaieni were injured to death and even to hunger, for life in the desert was harsh. But one night, a few days after Bisochim's return from Abi'Abadshar, Ahairan sent a pack of *atish'ban* dogs to attack them. The Black Dogs could not be turned by Bisochim's spells of compulsion, and they were shielded against his wards. There were so many of them that Lightning could not kill them all. In the moment when every person in the caravan believed that their fate was to be either quick death in the jaws of the Black Dogs or slow death when the Black Dogs slaughtered all of their livestock, the *ikulas* flung themselves into battle against this new enemy.

They killed hundreds of Ahairan's creatures and saved thousands of Isvaieni lives—because they saved the *shotors* and the herds as well. But the only *ikulas* that survived the unequal battle were puppies still young enough to be traveling in carrying baskets.

It took the Isvaieni sixty days to cross the Barahileth, and nine hundred and eighty-four Isvaieni had died by the time they reached Kannatha Well.



“COME, sit,” Liapha said cheerfully. Harrier had rarely seen her less than pleased with her circumstances, no matter what they were. Attacks by Darkspawn creatures, budding famine, tribal feuds . . . Liapha behaved as if all of it was a Flowering Fair play being enacted for her personal entertainment. He didn’t know how she’d taken the news of the death of her beloved *ikulas* hounds. He only knew that the next time he saw her, she had one of the orphaned puppies tucked into a fold of her robe. No *ikulas* older than six moonturns had survived the Black Dog attack; Liapha’s puppy had been one of just sixty-four surviving animals, none of which had originally belonged to the Kadyastar.

“There is *kaffeyah*. And by the great fortune of Sand and Star, the *rekhattan* remains unspoiled! I will have Rinurta prepare you a pipe!” Liapha puffed vigorously on her own.

“Yes to the *kaffeyah*, no to the pipe,” Harrier said, settling himself on a cushion at her right side and waving his hand to dispel the cloud of smoke. “The reason the *rekhattan* hasn’t been touched is because it would poison even *atish’ban* bugs. If we had enough of it, we could probably kill Ahairan with it.” He only wished he could be as philosophical about things as Liapha was. He’d probably explode.

“A terrible waste of thing that is not only comfort to the old, but medicine to all creatures,” Liapha said, unperturbed. “If there were no *rekhattan*, you could not do half the spells in your books, could you, now?”

“I use a lot of things in my spells. I don’t put them in a pipe and *breathe* them,” Harrier answered. He waited until Rinurta had poured him a cup of *kaffeyah*—a generous cup, not the tiny cup given as a guest-mouthful for politeness’ sake—to do more than tease Liapha. It had taken him a long time to learn how to respond to her behavior, and he’d finally decided to deal with her as if she were a cross between Cargomaster Tamaricans and one of his more-eccentric aunts. It seemed to work well enough.

It was the evening of the day they’d reached Kannatha Well. Bisochim had promptly turned it into Kannatha Lake—Kannatha Well was tiny, and they had thousands of thirsty animals—and that had apparently been the last straw for Shaiara.

“Will you turn the *Isvai* into a wasteland?” she demanded. “Are you Shadow-Touched in truth, that you can set aside every law that runs between Sand and Star because it pleases you to do so? When the *Isvai* has drained this water as dry as a greedy drunkard drains a waterskin, what shall take its place? Shall the *Isvaieni* say to their children, and to their children’s children: ONCE A WELL LAY AT KANNATHA, BUT NO LONGER, AND ALL FOR ONE MAN’S ARROGANCE AND PRIDE?”

Harrier might have been willing to concede Shaiara’s point, if not for the fact that he didn’t think that Ahairan cared that much about the *Isvai*, and he really didn’t either.

“Okay, destroying wells might be—might be—a bad idea,” he said to Tiercel that evening, after Shaiara stalked out of the tent without a word to either of them. “But if Ahairan fills the world with Demons, the *Isvaieni* are going to be dead along with everybody else. If we can manage to lock Ahairan up somewhere . . . the *Isvaieni* can go live somewhere else. They didn’t always live here. Before the Great Flowering, nobody lived here.”

Tiercel snickered rudely. “Oh, listen to Harrier the Great, who knows more history than the learned professors of Pre-Flowering History at Armethalieh University! As it happens, though, you’re right: before the Great Flowering, the desert went all the way north to the middle of the Armen Plains. According to The History of Reconciliation written by High Magistrate Cilarnen, there weren’t a lot of people anywhere. Just in the High Reaches—which is what they used to call those hills between Armethalieh and Sentarshadeen—and somewhere that High Magistrate Cilarnen called the Lost Lands, and nobody’s really sure of quite where that is now.”

“Probably because it’s still lost,” Harrier sniped back absently. He wasn’t distracted by the lecture. He’d been ignoring Tiercel’s lectures since Tiercel had learned to walk. “Which is exactly my point. They didn’t used to live here. They don’t have to keep living here.”

“Har, they’ve lived here for almost a thousand years,” Tiercel protested long-sufferingly.

“And I’m not going to lose sleep over whether or not they still can. They—one of them anyway—made this problem. They can all live with the consequences. I’m going to—”

“Shouldn’t that be ‘one of you’?” Tiercel asked quietly.

Harrier had been in the middle of reaching for his swords. He froze, straightened, turned around again. “What?”

“‘One of you,’” Tiercel repeated. “Bisochim’s *Isvaieni*, sure, but Shaiara couldn’t have summoned up Ahairan. Bisochim could do it because he was a Wildmage. So are you.”

“He could do it because he had a Dragon,” Harrier said flatly. “So this isn’t my problem. It’s yours.” He picked up his swords and walked out of the tent before Tiercel could say anything else.

So since Shaiara wasn’t speaking to him, and now he and Tiercel weren’t speaking to each other, Harrier had gone off to find Liapha.

“Well?” Liapha said, as soon as he’d taken his first sip. “I doubt you’ve come here to flirt. Or are you indeed looking for a wife?”

“I do not dare to hope, *Ummara* Liapha, knowing I can never afford your bride-price,” Harrier answered promptly. Everyone else sitting on the Kadyastar carpet laughed, and Liapha pounded him soundly upon the thigh in appreciation.

“Clever—and a Wildmage—ah, child, were things other than what they are, I would offer you the freedom of my tent and hope for the blessing of the Wild Magic! But ask what you would have of me, and we will see if I will give it.”

“Your wisdom, to one who comes, as all know, from the Cold North,” Harrier answered. The *Isvaieni* way of talking didn’t come naturally to him—any more than the indirection of the Elvenspeech ever had, no matter how hard Elunyerin and her brother Rilphanifel had worked to beat its conventions into him—but there were times that it had its advantages (even though it never seemed to get to the *point*), because while you were talking around in circles it gave you time to think of what you wanted to say. “Today I have heard a thing that puzzles me.”

The fun thing about his great new life was that no matter what problems he had, there were always new ones to ensure he didn’t have time to brood. Apparently, in the few hours he’d been asleep, everybody in the entire encampment had gone crazy, giving him an even better reason to come to see Liapha than just a little entertainment. “I have been asked where it is that we go, and I had thought this a matter settled long since.”

“Such a pity that the Blue Robes are of no tribe,” Liapha said pensively, patting his knee. “We go to Armethalieh, as we have sworn ourselves to do. But by what way shall we go? The *Isvai* holds many roads—and none—and best, so I think, if we know where we mean to go before we begin.”

Some careful questioning gained Harrier the information first, that they couldn’t go anywhere at all, since there were only two or three oases in the *Isvai* capable of providing water for the number of people and animals currently gathered here, and second, that all of them were too far away to reach them before the goats and sheep died of thirst.

“And though surely that is of no matter, since with Bisochim Blue Robe among us, any oasis or none is of no concern at all. And since the herds will starve once the

last of the dry forage is gone,” Liapha said cheerfully. “Unless it should happen that we travel a route where they can graze, and what path can feed all of them? And *that* does not matter, since we—and that great red termagant—will soon devour all of them ourselves, and then the *shotors*, and then we will all die.”

“Great,” Harrier muttered under his breath. “Well, in that case, we’ve got nothing to worry about, right?” he said more loudly. He set down his empty cup and got to his feet. “I thank you once again for the *kaffeyah*, and for your wise counsel, *Ummara* Liapha. I learn so much every time I talk to you.”

Liapha laughed up at him. “You are the joy of my old age, Harrier of the Cold North. Only think—once I feared I would die in the comfort of my tent, or be forced to decide what day was most auspicious for the laying of my bones upon the sand. You have lifted a great burden from my mind, and I am grateful.”



LIAPHA’S words turned out to be a grimmer prophecy than she could have known. The Isvaieni had expected to be able to hunt once they reached the Isvai. But as they moved north from Kannatha Well, they discovered that the desert had been mysteriously scoured clean of life. If it had not occurred to Tiercel to ask about the behavior of the desert insects a few days later—guessing first that Ahairan had used her *atish’ban* insects to accomplish that task—and then guessing that *atish’ban-khazdara* might behave in much the same fashion as normal *khazdara*, the animals would have starved. But *khazdara* didn’t eat the roots of the desert plants when they swarmed, and neither did *atish’ban-khazdara*. Where roots remained, Bisochim could bespell desert plants into life and instant luxurious growth. But that was only a temporary solution to a larger problem. The Isvaieni now faced the prospect of a journey of moonturns with no source of food beyond their rapidly-diminishing flocks.

Nor was Ahairan’s ingenuity exhausted.



HARRIER was doing mental arithmetic as he rode, trying to figure out how long they’d gone without being attacked and not liking the answer he got.

They’d gotten out of the Barahileth and reached Kannatha Well, where they’d spent the rest of that day, that night, and the following day, without incident. Two. They’d broken camp that evening and continued north. They’d stopped for the night, and an hour before dawn, *something* had attacked the camp and disappeared with twenty-two *shotors* before anyone could see what it was. So that counted: two days without attack, and an attack late on the third day. That day Bisochim had made grass grow, and again they’d stayed put through the day, only moving on at twilight. That was the day that *Ummara* Luthurm of the Adanate asked Bisochim to do a Foretelling to tell him if there was any game at all in the whole Dark-damned desert, and Bisochim said there wasn’t. They hadn’t been attacked again that day, or that evening when they moved on, or that night when they stopped, or yet this morning. So this was the middle of the second day without being attacked, and *maybe* that meant they had until tomorrow before they had to expect an attack, and maybe he shouldn’t be expecting Ahairan to keep to a *schedule*.

Either way, by scrubbing the Isvai clean of life, Ahairan had effectively shackled all of them together: without Bisochim to make the grass grow, the flocks would starve. Without the flocks, *they’d* starve. With this many animals traveling together, they needed Bisochim to create enough water for them. The Isvaieni couldn’t separate into their usual tribes . . . because there wasn’t anything to feed their animals.

And aside from that, Ahairan hadn’t really begun attacking the Isvaieni until Bisochim had come back. Ahairan had wanted to kill all the Isvaieni at Telinchechitl as Bisochim watched. Apparently, she *still* wanted him to watch. Harrier wasn’t sure whether that meant she’d kill anyone who left the group Bisochim traveled with, or that she wouldn’t let them leave, or that they’d be perfectly safe while they starved to death. He really didn’t want to find out.

“Here is a good place to stop to rest through the midday heat,” Sathan said, breaking into Harrier’s thoughts. He gestured toward an area off to the side of their line of march. It looked like soft sand. Sand was easier to set the tents in than *regh* was.

The *Ummara* of the Barantar was riding beside Harrier at the front of the caravan. Each tribe’s position in the line was set by ancient tribal precedence, but positions were gambled and traded among the *Ummarai* and *chaharums*, so a large tribe like the Kareggi might find itself split up in half-a-dozen places along the column, and a lucky one like the Kadyastar might find itself riding at the head for a sennight or more. Today the Barantar had won the coveted lead position. Normally Harrier would ride with the Nazindar no matter where they rode, but today he’d been too edgy to take a place where he couldn’t see the desert ahead.

“No,” Harrier said curtly. He wasn’t sure why he said it. He didn’t like Sathan—he actually liked *Zanattar* better than he liked Sathan—but that wasn’t the reason he’d dismissed Sathan’s suggestion.

“The sun climbs toward midheaven, Harrier,” Sathan said. His tone was respectful, but Harrier had been told off by experts, and he knew what disrespect sounded like. Sathan was already flicking his whip at the side of his *shotor*’s neck to bring it to a stop.

“I said we shouldn’t stop here,” Harrier repeated, more forcefully.

“Does the Wild Magic counsel you to this, Blue Robe?” Sathan asked, and now there was unconcealed scorn in his voice.

Harrier ignored him. *Flick-flick-flick* went the whip in his hands, and his *shotor* paced forward quickly, moving out a dozen yards ahead of Sathan’s. He didn’t know exactly when he’d developed the ability to stay constantly aware of everything around him even when he wasn’t looking at it. But right now he could tell even without turning to see that the caravan was stopping and spreading out, and that he had five minutes, maybe eight, before the order to stop made its way all the way to the back of the line. Another five beyond that—maybe—before the first *shotor* began to kneel. When that happened, the caravan would be paralyzed, unable to move quickly even if it wanted to.

He brought his *shotor* to a stop and simply swung himself sideways and dropped to the ground without asking it to kneel. It was a jarring landing, and he crouched for a moment, absorbing the impact. The *shotor* swung its head around to look at him, its large brown eyes regarding him with mild surprise.

He straightened and turned to look behind him, one hand on the lead-rope, the other on the hilt of his *awardan*. He’d worn one ever since the night they’d been attacked by the Black Dogs. There were some things he wouldn’t use his Selken blades on, and an *awardan* was easily replaced. He turned back, pointing the *shotor*’s head in the direction he wanted it to go. He wouldn’t think about what he was about to do.

He drew his *geschak*, shouting as he slashed the blade down over the *shotor*’s flank as hard as he could. Its head came up and it bolted forward, bawling in shock and pain. Behind him, Harrier heard Sathan laugh.

“Come to my tent once we have set it!” Sathan called to him. “And I will—”

Harrier never did find out how that sentence would have ended. When the *shotor* reached the soft sand, the desert exploded upward and outward, and something that looked like the biggest *jarrari* that Harrier had ever seen shot out from its hidden burrow. The creature was about twice the size of the *shotor*. It was black like glass, like something that had been burnt until it glittered. *That’s what killed almost two dozen of our shotors three nights ago . . .*

It cut the *shotor* into pieces before the animal had time to scream. Harrier had begun running toward it before the *shotor* was dead. It wasn’t the safest thing to do, but it was safer than staying where he was. The moment the thing had come up out of its burrow, every single animal in the caravan—sheep, goats, *shotors*—had launched into a dead run, and if he didn’t want to be trampled, he needed to get out of their way. Fast.

He barely made it. But as ground trembled beneath his boots, it occurred to him it might have been better to be trampled than to become a giant *atish’ban-jarrari*’s dessert.

“Harrier! Here!” Saravasse shouted.

The *thing* had stopped its scuttling rush toward him at the dragon’s arrival. Harrier ran toward her, never taking his eyes off it, until he collided with her side. She dropped her chest to the ground and cocked her elbow outward, giving him all the help she could to mount. “Touch my wing and I will kill you myself,” Saravasse growled.

Harrier didn’t answer. He couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t horribly rude or brutally honest or just plain stupid, and he was too busy scrambling onto her back anyway. Saravasse’s scales were slick, except at the very edges where they were as sharp as broken glass, and his hands were bleeding in a hundred places by the time he could grab Bisochim’s hand. Bisochim yanked him onto Saravasse’s neck, and she immediately started to run. Harrier had a sudden jarring sense-memory of the last time he’d been on a dragon’s back. Then it had been Tiercel in front of him, and the dragon had been Ancaladar, and they’d been convinced they were heading off to their last battle, and victory.

“You know that thing’s just going to come after you now?” he shouted to Saravasse. Hot wind whipped past his face.

“I can outrun it,” she answered confidently.

He glanced behind them. Light glittered off the monster’s carapace. It held its barbed tail high as it skittered along behind them just like a *jarrari*. It didn’t drop behind as he counted heartbeats in his head. “No, you can’t. You really can’t,” he said when he’d reached ten.

“She will not need to,” Bisochim said grimly. He half-turned and stretched out his hand. Harrier dug his heels into Saravasse’s neck as hard as he could to keep from falling off and looked too. He thought Bisochim was going to call down a lightning bolt to blast the nightmare thing into nothing, but Bisochim didn’t. Instead, its shell began to turn milky gray, and its movements became jerky and uncontrolled. Saravasse slowed to a stop as it started to run in circles, and the three of them watched as it stopped and flailed weakly and finally fell onto its back, curling inward on itself. Tiercel said that was why people thought that *jarrari* stung themselves to death, although they really didn’t. Harrier didn’t care, as long as it meant this thing was dead. The sand beneath its body was dark with melted moisture, and the air above it shimmered with evaporating water.

“You froze it,” Harrier said in realization.

“Cold is the most terrible death I know,” Bisochim answered quietly, and Harrier thought of a roadside inn on the Delfier Road between Armethalieh and Sentarshadeen, of a summer night more than a year ago.

“Yeah,” he said. “It is.”



THEY’D been out of the Barahileth for a fortnight now. Aside from three more encounters with the giant *shotor*-eating *atish’ban-jarrari* (Tiercel had named them “Sandwalkers,” pointing out that “Sandwalker” was shorter than “giant *shotor*-eating *atish’ban-jarrari*”), Ahairan had left them alone. Harrier had a hunch that Ahairan had just created the Sandwalkers and turned them loose, which meant that Ahairan hadn’t actually attacked them since they’d left the Barahileth. Tiercel said the Sandwalkers were probably starving and Ciniran said that true *jarrari* could hibernate when there was no food and Harrier refused to feel sorry for *atish’ban anything*.

For now, they were . . . surviving. At each midday halt, Bisochim called up a spring and then made the desert flourish as best he could. His success depended on whether or not there were roots buried under the sand or in the clay: when there were, he could make them grow. They’d been able to stop feeding the animals off stored supplies, and Harrier had insisted that they hold the rest of the feed-grain in reserve. Just as Bisochim could turn buried roots into mature plants in hours, he could turn seeds into harvestable crop in the same length of time, doubling or tripling their supply of grain. He’d have to.

Harrier didn’t want to know any of the things he knew now, but nobody—least of all the Wild Magic—had given him a choice about knowing them. And none of them were good.

He talked to Tiercel a lot these days—about everything but their current problems—and by now Harrier knew his Ancient History a lot better than he ever had back in Armethalieh Normal School. From the Medath Mountains north of the City to the Armen Plains in the south was about five hundred miles. From Armethalieh to the far end of the Delfier Valley was about a hundred and fifty miles. Back in the Time of Mages those had been the boundaries of the City lands, and that meant those had been the boundaries of the world. And you could drop The City all the way out to the edges of its ancient boundary lands into the middle of the Isvai and not even raise a puff of dust anywhere near the edges of the desert.

And that was why they had something larger than a problem, but just a little *slower* than any disaster Harrier had ever heard of. Bisochim could feed the sheep and the goats and the *shotors*, and Harrier was thankful for that. But Bisochim couldn’t multiply them. In the way that Harrier had once learned to estimate cargoes and capacities and tonnages, he now estimated how much longer their livestock could feed all of them.

Two moonturns. No more.

When the sheep and goats were gone they could eat the *shotors*, of course, because apparently the Isvaieni saw nothing wrong with eating *shotors*, but they needed to have enough left alive to ride, and they needed them as pack animals, because if they didn’t have tents for shelter, they’d die. Eating the *shotors* would only delay the inevitable by another moonturn, maybe two. And when the last *shotor* was gone, they’d still be somewhere in the middle of this damned desert, with no way to carry shelter or supplies with them. And no supplies, anyway.

The Isvaieni calculated their routes by time, and never went from here to there by the most direct route anyway, but the Binrazan had used to travel along the String of Pearls from Orinaisal’Iteru to Akazidas’Iteru. To go from one end to the other of the Border Cities had taken them roughly eighteen moonturns, but they hadn’t traveled every day. Based on what he’d learned from *Ummara* Phulda, Harrier figured he could get the Isvaieni from where they were now to Akazidas’Iteru in about . . . five moonturns. Of course, they’d have to figure out how to survive without eating for three of them.

Since that wasn’t possible, they were going to Sapthiruk Oasis, assuming they could find it. It was where the Isvaieni held their Gathering of the Tribes. Shaiara said it was six sennights north of Kannatha Well, which meant less than another moonturn. Best of all, the oasis was large enough to water all their animals. Because just when Harrier got used to the idea of starving to death, it turned out that water was a problem after all.

Bisochim was happy—as happy as he ever seemed to be about anything—to tell anyone who asked that it might soon be impossible for him to call water at all, which didn’t really help morale a lot. It wasn’t because his magic was failing, but—as far as Harrier could tell—because he’d yanked the Balance around so much in the last year that there just wasn’t water near the surface to call anymore. Because of what Ahairan had done to the Isvai, they were still as dependent on Bisochim for survival as they’d been in the Barahileth, and despite what Tiercel said about Ahairan wanting Bisochim to become her personal Dark-Tainted Dragonbond Mage, Harrier was constantly aware that Bisochim could die at any moment. If he did, so would every single one of them.

Even if the wells and oases in the Isvai all hadn’t gone dry because of Bisochim’s meddling—something they wouldn’t know until they looked, if they even could—the Isvaieni couldn’t dependably find them anymore. With all the desert plants gone, the landmarks they’d relied on all their lives had shifted so much that *Tiercel* was as likely to know where something in the Isvai was now as someone who’d been “born between Sand and Star.”

Harrier hadn’t gotten a look at Kannatha Well before Bisochim had turned it into a lake. He wished now that he had. He would have liked to have known whether or

not it had been dry, because Kannatha had been supposed to be an unfailing *iteru*, and if it had been dry, well . . . Shaiara said: *when there are two roads to an oasis, "bad" and "worse," take the bad one*. Harrier supposed that meant you should take the best choice available, but they didn't have any good ones. Ahairan kept taking them all away.

They needed a water source that wasn't created by magic one day and gone the next. They needed a food source that Bisochim could renew. And it needed to be a place they could reach within two moonturns at most.

All of that meant Sapthirik Oasis.

If they could even find Sapthirik Oasis.



"HOW much of an emergency is this?" Harrier asked. Tiercel looked at him as if he'd suddenly gone crazy.

They were stopped for the night. In another six hours or so it would be just before dawn, and half the camp would be taking down the tents and loading the *shotors* while the other half prepared the morning meal, such as it was. Most of their meals were tea and broth—or hot water and broth—these days. Broth stretched the carcasses of the slain sheep and goats farthest. Only Saravasse and the *ikulas* pups ate meat.

"This would be . . . fleeing for our lives across the Isvai and attempting to get to Armethalieh so Magistrate Vaunnel can send a message to the Elven Lands to let them know that the Spirit of Darkness is free and could they please send us some Elven Mages to Bind her before she fills the world with Demons and wipes out all life? Or was there something else?" Tiercel asked.

"No, that was it," Harrier said. He lay back on his sleeping-mat and stared up at the top of the tent.

Tiercel made an exasperated noise. "Is this your way of telling me you've found out something new? Because if not, then the answer to your question is: yeah. I'd consider that letting somebody know about that to be really urgent. And yesterday, you did too."

Harrier sat up again. "No, really," he said. "Say it's a moonturn to Sapthirik Oasis like Shaiara says. Say we spend a sennight or so there building up our supplies. After that it's maybe two more moonturns to Akazidas'Iteru, then another moonturn—because we'll take horses if I have to bespell someone to get them—up the Trade Road to Armethalieh. Or . . . a little more than a third of a year before we can get to the Chief Magistrate. Half a year since Ahairan got loose, because we spent two moonturns in the Barahileth. Is it really going to matter by then?"

"No," Tiercel answered promptly. "The Dark has already won. Let's go to Karahelanderialigor instead. We can just head due east—" He pointed.

"Nice try," Harrier said, "but that's west."

"—and be there in three—"

"—eight—"

"—six—"

"—seven—"

"—moonturns," Tiercel finished. "And we can warn Queen Vairindiel directly."

"Same question," Harrier said, staring up at the ceiling of the tent. "Only eight moonturns, not five, and that's just to the edge of the Veil. No guarantees anyone can get through it."

They were alone in the tent. Sometimes Bisochim didn't come in at all, and the Nazindar spent hours sitting outside just staring off into the desert. Harrier had long since given up trying to figure out why anyone around here did anything. He was just glad of the illusion of privacy.

"Harrier," Tiercel said quietly, "what else can we do? We can't go back—there's no *back*. There's just—"

"Light and darkness!" Harrier swore, rolling to his feet and grabbing his swords. "Come on!"



TIERCEL didn't stop to wonder what Harrier heard or sensed or whatever. He just grabbed a cloak and a spear and ran after him. He hadn't gone two steps outside the tent before he heard Saravasse's voice: "There are strangers coming! Arm yourselves! *Arm yourselves!*"

Harrier swore again, and Tiercel groaned under his breath. Sound carried for miles in the desert and they could both hear the noises that meant the *shotors* were upset and preparing to bolt. That meant the goats had probably already fled and the sheep were thinking about it. They seemed to spend half their time chasing the herds and the other half trying to feed them.

Saravasse hadn't indicated a direction, but Harrier didn't seem to be in any doubt of where he was going, and everybody who saw him running followed him. At least they didn't have to go more than a dozen yards before they were on open sand—whatever was coming, was coming from the south, and that was the edge of the camp the Nazindar tents were pitched on.

"Where is it?" Tiercel demanded edgily. The moon hadn't risen yet, and the desert was still dark.

"There," Harrier said, drawing his swords. "Give me some light, Tyr."

Tiercel made a ball of MageLight, then another. Each sphere continued to grow as it left his hands and soared southward.

"Wait," Harrier said softly, but he wasn't speaking to Tiercel. "Hear it?"

"Yes." If Kamar hadn't been standing just behind him, Tiercel wouldn't have heard his voice. Everyone who'd followed Harrier had stopped when he had, fanning out in a long line along the perimeter of the camp, each man and woman straining to see into the dark. Behind them, the camp had fallen eerily silent, and after a moment Tiercel could hear what Kamar heard; the faint squeaking of footsteps on sand.

"They are men," Bakhudun said a moment later. The Hinturi *Ummara's* voice was soft with disbelief.

"No," Harrier said. "I don't know what they are, but . . . not men."

By the MageLight's glow Tiercel could see them. There were too many bodies to count, all walking slowly forward across the sands. Bakhudun was right. They looked like people. He made his next ball of MageLight sweep down low, shining its light full in the faces of those in the lead, and then he could finally see them clearly. They were naked and barefoot, but every one of them carried some weapon, even if it was nothing more than a length of charred wood. Their skin was as dark as cured leather, and it stretched across their bones so tightly that it seemed as if there was no longer any flesh beneath. Their eyes were nothing more than dark holes in their skulls, their mouths hung open in eternal silent screams.

"Sand and Star," Bakhudun whispered in disbelief. "It is Bramah."

Tiercel was shaking his head, wanting to say: *No, you're wrong—you're mistaken*. Bramah had been Bakhudun's eldest son. He'd died just before they'd left the Barahileth, stung to death by Ahairan's *atish'ban-jarrari*. Tiercel sucked in a ragged breath, suddenly feeling weak and sick.

Ahairan walking through the streets of Tarnatha'Iteru, followed by a parade of the dead . . .

Dreams. Tiercel had been sure they were dreams. He still dreamed about Ahairan almost every night, though after the first sennight or so he'd stopped waking up

screaming. Harrier was always complaining these days that Tiercel talked in his sleep, but a lot of people in the camp these days had nightmares. Neither of them had thought anything of it. But *what if they weren't nightmares?*

"I must—" Bakhudun said, taking a step forward.

"It is not your Bramah," Kamar said, stepping forward to take his arm. "Any more than that beside him is my Harran. Their flesh, no more."

"What do we wait for?" Zanattar arrived, breathing hard as if he'd been running. He spoke loudly, and the ball of MageLight just now rising out of Tiercel's hands made the wide curved blade of his *awardan* flash brightly. "Whether they are men or *atish'ban* men, what has the form of a man can die as one, and surely I and my Young Hunters have slain men before!"

There were almost two hundred Isvaieni gathered here at the southern edge of the camp by now. Tiercel realized that for the last few minutes he'd been shifting forward unconsciously as the crowd behind him increased. He glanced sideways at Harrier, expecting to see anything but what he saw. He expected determination or anger or even irritation. But Harrier just looked terrified.

There was a moment in which Harrier might have stopped Zanattar, when he could have told him "no" or "wait" or "let's do something else." But he waited a moment too long, and Zanattar uttered a blood-chilling howl and ran out across the sands toward the advancing enemy. The moment Zanattar began to run, the rest of the "Young Hunters" followed, all of them giving voice to the same unnerving cry. Beneath the chain of MageLights, the robes of the running Isvaieni glowed brightly. The naked bodies of the enemies they ran to slay were dark and shadowy.

Tiercel thought that Harrier might try to call the Young Hunters back, or follow them, or . . . something. But he simply stood watching them, his swords still clutched in his hands, and Tiercel wondered if Harrier was going to stand there and watch the entire battle. At least he wasn't the only one who'd stayed. Neither Kamar nor Bakhudun had followed Zanattar into the desert.

"Harrier! Come quickly!" Saravasse's voice cut through the howling of Zanattar's people—a dragon could shout very loudly when it wanted to.

Her voice seemed to shock Harrier out of whatever daze he'd fallen into. Saravasse was at the *shotor* grounds, so Harrier went around the edge of the camp, where he could skirt the crowds that had gathered. Some of those at the camp's edge were already running into the desert to join Zanattar, but Bakhudun and Kamar—and Tiercel—followed Harrier, and others, seeing that, followed him as well.

There were more Isvaieni gathered here than there had been to the south of the camp. Protecting the animals was everyone's main concern, and nobody had known where the danger was coming from. Despite the fact that they'd been so restless before, the *shotors* all lay peacefully in their places. The goats and sheep—equally quiet—stood placidly nearby, all obviously bespelled by Bisochim.

Since that first attack by the Sandwalkers, the *shotor* grounds were always kept brightly-lit. Creating MageLight and Coldfire was their first task at night camp, and there was enough light here to show the reason for Saravasse's alarm. Tiercel took a couple of globes of MageLight out of the hovering formation and sent them across the desert toward the advancing figures. It was confirmation, nothing more. The light lit up the same desiccated unclothed bodies, the same hollow eye-sockets and hanging jaws, as the first group he'd seen. The creatures moved with a distinctive shambling gait, as if they'd forgotten how to walk.

The noise of fighting from the south had increased, and several of the men and women at the *shotor*-ground began to move in that direction. As soon as he saw what was happening, Harrier said to Saravasse: "Stop them." He didn't bother to shout—a dragon's hearing was extremely sharp.

"Come back here!" Saravasse bellowed, loud enough to make Tiercel wince and cover his ears. "And do what Harrier tells you to," she finished in a stern—and marginally-quieter—voice.

"Bisochim?" Tiercel asked.

"To the east. He builds a wall of ice to defend us. They come from all sides," Saravasse answered.

"And we can't defend all sides," Harrier said in disgust. "Here's a question: how do we kill them if they aren't alive?" Tiercel was pretty sure Harrier was talking to himself, but if it was indecision, it passed quickly. "You—you—you—" Harrier said, turning away from the advancing line of . . . whatever they were. Harrier grabbed about a dozen people, and his choices looked random, but Tiercel knew they weren't. He'd picked Kamar and Bakaduk and Sathan, and every *chaharum* and *Ummara* in the crowd. "Go through the camp. Get everyone out of the tents—*everyone!* Send everyone who can fight to the edge of the camp with the lanterns. Gather everyone who can't—the cripples, the old—in the middle, in the open. One strong fighter for every five of them stays with them. Don't tell me 'everyone' can fight. Just do what I say."

No one argued.

"What about me?" Tiercel said. He didn't want to be told to go and hide, but he knew he was no fighter.

"Stay here. Make light. If we all die, take Bisochim and Saravasse and head for the Veiled Lands, not Armethalich."

"But—"

"Argue later. Light now," Saravasse said. "I promise, Harrier."

"Good," Harrier said. "You. You were at Tamatha'Iteru, weren't you? Then you can hit things. Come on." He grabbed the arm of the woman next to him and they began to walk out toward the enemy.



A NALZINDAR'S first weapons were nearly toys: the sharpened stick that could pierce no beast's skin, the sling and pebbles that could not stun even the lowest-flying bird, the *geschak* that did not yet have either edge or point. Despite their harmlessness they were all weapons, and every Nalzindar expected to carry weapons everywhere and use them always until he or she laid their bones upon the sand at last, but until she had come away from Telinchechitl, Shaiara had never carried a sword. She carried one now, just as she carried her bow and arrows, her *geschak*, and her sling, and she kept a throwing-spear to hand when she could.

The great flat heavy thing felt awkward in her hands: it was not a weapon the Nalzindar used, for the *awardan* had only one purpose. Shaiara hated it and everything it meant with an intensity that left her breathless, and each day when she took it up, she begged of Sand and Star: *Let this day be the last day. Let there be no reason for me to have to wear this blade upon the morrow.* And yet when each new day came, it always brought with it the need to wear the *awardan* upon her hip once more.

This night she had walked a little way out into the desert. Not far—for Shaiara was no fool—but far enough that she could stand with her back to the farthest row of tents and fix her eyes upon the eastern horizon and say to herself that she was alone here. Or so she might have been able to do had she suddenly been struck incapable of hearing, for the sounds of the thousands behind her were like the roaring of the Sandwind itself and—closer still—Harrier and Tiercel argued about some trifling matter that they would have forgotten by the time the lamps were shrouded for sleep. She thought that when all was lost, and all were slain, and Ahairan prepared to plunge the world into Darkness Eternal, the two of them would still be arguing, and in just this way, and about matters just this inconsequential, as if they could set the world to rights by burying it beneath a flood of words.

Not even a handspan of night had passed before Shaiara recalled that careless thought. Did Harrier and Tiercel still argue? She did not know.

She had heard Saravasse summon the camp to face some danger and went to gather her Nalzindar and make certain each had every weapon they could carry. Either

the danger was so small and brief that others could deal with it without them, or it would require every arrow and spear they could bring to the affray. By the time they were properly prepared, she knew there was fighting at the south of the camp. Shaiara heard the ululating wail of Isvaieni rushing to battle; heard Saravasse shout for Harrier. She gathered her Isvaieni and went, not knowing what they faced, save that it did not fly.

As they ran toward the battlefield, she saw a man she knew—Hadyan of the Kadyastar—dragging an injured Isvaieni back across the sand. The woman yet breathed, though her *chadar* was gone and her face was covered in blood. The stump of a spear protruded from her chest, and with each laboring open-mouthed breath she took, she sprayed fresh blood over her chin and chest.

“What enemy?” Shaiara demanded, looking toward the battle. Her people stopped with her.

“Men!” Hadyan answered. “*Atish’ban* men! They cannot die—and their numbers increase—*Ummara*—you must help me get Rinurta to Bisochim—she must not die—”

“She dies now, Hadyan,” Shaiara said gently. “Even Bisochim cannot call her back from death. I will help her, if you wish.”

She waved the others onward toward the battle and put her hand on her *geschak*, but to her astonishment, Hadyan dropped the edges of Rinurta’s robes and sprang forward to grab her wrist. “No!” he shouted. “She must not die!”

Raffa seized his arm and jerked his hand free of Shaiara’s wrist so forcefully that Hadyan staggered. “You forget yourself, Kadyastar,” she said.

“She dies now, Hadyan,” Ciniran said. She had knelt beside Rinurta, not touching her. Rinurta began to gag and choke in her final agony, her body arching backward.

“Back—get back!” Hadyan shouted, his voice full of fear.

Ciniran got to her feet and backed away, though her puzzled expression plainly said that she thought Hadyan’s behavior came from maddened grief at Rinurta’s death. A moment later Rinurta slumped back, lifeless.

“Come,” Shaiara said, turning to go.

And Rinurta sat up.

Her eyes were wide and staring, her face expressionless, her slack mouth drooling blood. She yanked the broken spear from her shoulder—as it came forth, Shaiara saw that it was a heavy spear with a metal point, unlike the weapons of the Isvaieni—and she held the broken thing in her hand as if it was a deadly fighting knife. So armed, Rinurta began to shuffle quickly toward Hadyan.

“*Atish’ban!*” Hadyan cried wildly, backing away. “*Atish’ban!* We cannot slay them! They kill us and our dead rise up to fight for them!”

Talmac stepped forward. Unlike the rest of the Nazindar, he had refused to carry an *awardan*. Instead, he carried a length of tent-pole that had been smoothed down and wrapped in beaten lead in the fashion of the weapons of the flock-guards, the whole wrapped in wide strips of braided leather. The first swing of the weapon smashed the front of *atish’ban*-Rinurta’s face in and knocked the creature sprawling, and for a moment the Nazindar thought it was truly slain now. But then it rose to its feet once more.

The next time Talmac smashed it down, Shaiara drew her *awardan* and cut off its head. Again it rose to its feet and shambled forward, moving as surely as if it still had eyes to see.

“Here is the spell the Shadowspawn has been weaving while her attention has been gone from us,” Ciniran said wildly. “How do we slay what cannot die?”

“It will not matter if what lies unslain cannot do us harm,” Shaiara answered grimly. “This night we shall be butchers if not warriors.”



IT took them far longer than Shaiara liked to do what needed to be done. She hardened her spirit to the work—the thing was no longer Rinurta, merely Ahairan’s tool. Even when there was no body, only pieces of flesh, the pieces still twitched and writhed upon the sand. But they could no longer hold a weapon, nor could they attempt to choke the life from the living.



BY the time the Nazindar reached the battle-line, others had come to the same conclusion that Shaiara had. The ground was littered with bodies not dead—for they had not been alive—but . . . sundered. Even those Isvaieni who had ridden with Zanattar to war and taken from his ways the disorder of the spirit that made them lust to fight and kill found here more battle than even they had hunger for. And there seemed to be no end to the enemy.

If Shaiara were still able to be horrified, this night would have held enough horrors to glut her spirit beyond measure. As terrible as it was to have to destroy the bodies of Isvaieni who had been alive when the sun had set this day, it was far worse to confront withered sun-dried husks and know that they were bodies that had been laid upon the sand sennights—and even moonturns—before. But worse even than these was to find yourself facing an *atish’ban*-man that had never been born within any tent.

No two of them were alike. Their tireless shuffling forms might be clothed in sun-weathered rags, or in charred scraps of cloth whose tatters festooned expanses of burnt bone, or sometimes in the blackened remains of leather armor. Some bodies still held the remains of the weapon that had killed them—arrow or spear or knife—and most had limbs and bodies hacked and shattered by Isvaieni swords. The thing that made these *atish’ban*-corpses so much more terrible to face than any other was none of these things, but the fact that their half-skeletal remains were fleshed out by the rotting putrid bodies of dead animals, or by masses of swarming biting insects, or merely by clots of sand. *It is an evil day upon which we reap the harvest of Zanattar’s sowing.*

Shaiara and her Nazindar were at the outermost edge of the fighting. They who lived were fleeter of foot than the dead things which moved as if they lived—but unless the defenders wanted to lead their attackers into the encampment itself, they were slowly being trapped. More of the dead had approached them from the east, sealing off that line of retreat, and when Shaiara had risked a glance behind her, she had seen a wall of white around the tents that rose so high that no tent could be seen. She did not know where there might be an opening in it, nor could she entrust her life to the belief that there was some such opening if she could not see it. It was a hard thing to be grateful for evil done in an evil time, but had Zanattar not come to them dressed in robes of murder, truly all who stood with them would be dead now, for it was Zanattar with his moonturns of warcraft who had seen that Ahairan’s tools attempted to surround them, and it was Zanattar who had ordered them to place themselves in such a way that it could not be done.

Shaiara set her teeth in her lower lip so hard she tasted blood and backed slowly across the uneven ground. It was littered with debris that was not alive yet would not be still, and she had already fallen once tonight as a severed limb, fat and dangerous with flesh, had wrapped itself about her ankle as if it were a snare set for game. All who fought tried desperately not to allow any of their people to be wounded to death. But those about to die were flung ruthlessly into the hands of the enemy rather than allowed to remain among them and—in death—become a foe clasped to the throats of the living. There was no choice. They were cut off from the camp, and even before they had been, if an injured defender had reached the camp and died within it, they would have done nothing other than brought the enemy within their defenses, and who knew what might happen then?

Now the defenders and the attackers stood in two curving lines, coiling and twisting against each other like desert adders, and the living line tired and weakened, and

the unliving line did not. As Shaiara backed away, the body of Hadyan shuffled toward her. Blood from Hadyan's slashed throat had soaked the front of its robes, it was not yet dry. The *awardan* in its hand still gleamed. While he had yet lived, Hadyan had avoided those *atish'ban*-corpses who had risen up from the new-slain, and the others had no blood in their bodies. Shaiara's limbs ached with weariness. This was hard painful work that killed mind and body and spirit together, this need to hack and hack and hack at an enemy that never stopped moving and never died. Even the ones that looked as frail as a bundle of oilbark twigs were stronger than a young bull *shotor*—those Isvaieni who had not been wary enough or suspicious enough had taught the survivors that grim lesson early, and rose up as enemies with their throats ripped open.

The body of Hadyan swung its sword as it advanced, as if unliving metal as well as unliving flesh anticipated her death. Shaiara sprang forward and struck as hard as she could, but she was tired and her blade had dulled—she cut to the bone but did not sever the hand. The shock made *atish'ban*-Hadyan drop its *awardan*, at least, and so there was a brief moment when it paused and stooped—with ponderous deliberation—to pick it up again. In that moment, Talmac rushed forward with his club, smashing the body of Hadyan to the ground. Talmac continued to beat it, rhythmically, like a woman threshing grain, so that each time it attempted to struggle to its feet it was knocked down again. And in the moments that it lay helpless. Shaiara dropped her *awardan* and seized the one it had carried—though her skin crawled to touch it—and with a blade that had not been dulled by handspan after handspan of hacking through meat and bone, she began to cut the body of Hadyan into pieces as Talmac continued to batter at it so that it would not rise up again to fight.

“*Shaiara!*”

She told herself that her relief at hearing Harrier's voice was merely that if he lived, then surely there must be an end to this fighting, some victory.

“Back,” Harrier said as he reached her. “Retreat. Fast as you can.” He touched her shoulder briefly and moved on through the press of Isvaieni, taking his message to others.

Shaiara found Ciniran, Raffā, Natha, and Narkil, and told them to retreat. Talmac had been beside her and had heard Harrier's word. She had already destroyed the body of Tanjel this night. The bodies of Kattan and Taspoc had been destroyed by others not of the Nazindar, but Shaiara had seen them fall, and later had seen the destruction of their bodies. Ciniran and Raffā had destroyed the body of Marnuk. Larasan and Thadnat yet lived, and she had not seen Kamar since before the beginning of the battle. She counted quickly. Seven, perhaps eight—and the eight children at Abi'Abadshar—were all that remained of the Nazindar.

Even as she reckoned the cost of the night's battle, Shaiara was moving through the press of warriors, giving Harrier's word to those who had not yet heard it. It was a simple matter—though hard in the heart—to do as he bid. All that one must do was turn and run, leaving those at the front of the battle to fight on alone. She was one of the last to run—Zanattar ran beside her and she was certain Harrier followed—and when she reached the wall—it was ice, breathing out cold as a fire might send heat—Shaiara stopped and looked back.

Harrier had not come with them. He stood alone in the desert, crowned in the blue fire that hovered above this place of death beyond death, as the *atish'ban*-corpses shambled toward him over the scattered bodies of their own kind.

“I must go back,” Zanattar said, starting forward.

“You must wait!” Shaiara said, her voice a harsh whisper. She dropped her *awardan* to the sand and grabbed his arm. “We shall see what the Wildmage holds in his heart.”

She watched as Harrier reached out his hand, pointing.

And the *atish'ban*-corpses began to burn.

They burned in silence, as if they were unaware that they burned. The dried flesh of the ancient dead kindled in a flash; ancient rags burst into flame in a rush of sparks. The robes of the fresh dead burned brightly for a few moments before they too burned away, but the dead still burned, and their scorching flesh gave off black smoke and a sweet familiar scent of roasting meat that made Shaiara ill to smell it. All of the dead walked onward, brightly burning.

The ancient dead were the first to fall, crumbling away into fragments of charcoal and embers blown upon the wind. Only the fresh-killed dead now remained—barely a score of bodies shambling implacably across the sand. They sizzled like fat meat at Gathering time, their bodies red and black with fire. Blue flames danced over their skin as they burned. But still they came.

“Run *now*, Harrier!” Saravasse cried. “Run, all of you!”

Harrier turned and ran—toward them, toward the wall of ice. Shaiara turned and ran as well, along it, following the tracks others before her had left in their flight. Its surface was cold and wet beneath her hand, and her throat clutched with thirst.

The wall curved, and they'd gotten a little way along it—far enough for Shaiara to see a great fire kindled off in the desert—when there was a flash behind her. Bisochim had called lightning, a sky-fire hot enough to burn even fresh meat to ash.

Harrier staggered to a stop and sank to his knees in the sand, gasping for air. “Fire destroys them,” he said between gasps. “Sometimes you need a really big one. I should have thought of that . . . sooner.”

“More,” Shaiara said, her words short and clipped by her weariness and pain. “There were more. And—”

Harrier nodded, still too winded to speak. He waved toward the north. “Blocked off the camp,” he said, between gasps for air. “They . . . went around it. She must have . . .” He shuddered and stopped, but Shaiara knew what he would have said. *Ahairan must have called up all the dead from every one of the Iteru-cities.*

There was no note of censure in Harrier's voice, yet beside her, Zanattar moaned in the voice of one who had taken so grievous an injury it could not be borne in silence.

Harrier staggered to his feet with a groan. “Yeah. You're going to find them a little harder to kill this time,” he said.

“Do not!” Zanattar begged. “I have—”

“You've fought to save your own skin tonight,” Harrier said flatly. “You did a good job, too. But I'm sure you know exactly how many more of those things Ahairan has to throw at us.”

“They are slow,” Shaiara said. It was the only comfort she could think of to offer.

“We need to sleep, and they don't,” Harrier said grimly. “And fire will destroy them, but there are only three of us who can Call Fire, and I'm not sure how long Tyr can do it before he falls over. He and I can only burn the old ones, anyway, not any that are . . . new. We're running out of arrows—and I suppose out of things to make arrows out of?”

“Thornbush makes a good arrow, if the wood is soaked and straightened. The root of the desert plum, though it must be cured with care. The bone of the *shotor* also makes a serviceable arrow, though it is sometimes brittle. But many . . .” Zanattar stopped.

“Many simply chose to trade with the city-dwellers for wood from the Tereymil Hills,” Shaiara finished, her voice hard, “for trees grow in that place whose wood makes a fine arrowshaft.”

“Well, we aren't going to be doing that any time soon,” Harrier said. “Come on.”

As they walked in the direction of the *shotor*-ground, they passed a group of Isvaieni walking toward the battlefield. All carried spears, and a couple of them carried the large woven baskets that were a common means of packing and carrying. The fitful night wind carried the scent of burning wood and burning flesh into Shaiara's

nostrils. As she had said, there were no trees in the Deep Desert save at the largest of the oases, and the *atish'ban-khazdara* had probably destroyed those as well, but even so, there was wood to be found to build a pyre. Ever since the Isvaieni had discovered that their home had become a barren waste, all the desertfolk had winnowed their possessions, day by day, casting off that which was foolish and unnecessary, as the true-*khazdara* cast off its skin before it began to swarm.

But nothing that was wood had been buried in the sand and left behind to be forgotten. Wood would burn.

The wall of ice stopped suddenly—it was thicker than the height of the tallest man, Shaiara discovered when she reached its edge—and now that she had come to the end of it, Shaiara could see that the entire eastern side of the encampment was still open to the desert. Better, she decided, that it be so, that they be able to run, if need had come.

When they reached the *shotor* ground, Tiercel awaited them. Kamar stood beside him, and Shaiara allowed herself a breath of gladness. Though she felt her tribe's losses keenly, Shaiara did not think it greedy to take a moment for joy that her father's brother lived. The Isvaieni had lost so much this night, kinships and bloodlines that had survived the crossing of the Barahileth, all gone. The Kadyastar had lost not only its *Ummara*-to-be with Hadyan's death, but in the death of Rinurta, the last of Liapha's direct line was gone as well.

Tiercel handed Harrier a waterskin. Harrier passed it to Shaiara untouched, and she drank deeply. "Is there going to be enough wood?" Harrier asked, gazing out into the desert.

"Probably," Tiercel answered. "We're going to use all of it, though. Har, I need—"

"We'll think of something else for next time, then." Harrier sighed, and scrubbed his hand over his chin, pulling at his beard.

Shaiara passed the waterskin to Zanattar. He took it with a soft word of thanks and, when he had returned it, walked on toward the tents, seeking out other Lanzanur, or perhaps merely others of the Young Hunters whom he had led into battle this night. She found it within her to hope that the madness had not claimed all of them; it was a thing not seen among the Nalzindar, but she had heard it spoken of at the Gatherings of the Tribes, and heard how it could even be passed from one sufferer to the next, as if it were a disease of flesh, and not a disorder of the spirit. And while she pondered this, Shaiara turned Harrier's unyielding words to Zanattar over in her thoughts. All knew that Wildmage wisdom could be bitter as tea brewed from the rock-*naranje*, and she did not know yet whether to think that the Wild Magic had spoken, or his own heart. Death lay between Harrier and Zanattar, and that was a heavy burden, yet that Zanattar should now know that those he had been moved to slay through lies and folly had become the Darkspawn's weapon was a heavier burden still.

"Where's Saravasse?" Harrier asked, looking around.

"She's out by the fire. Keeping watch," Tiercel answered. "Everybody else has to watch the fire, so . . . you know. Look, Har, we really need to—"

"Yeah," Harrier said. "Good. I'll just—"

"Sit," Shaiara said. "Rest. Sleep."

Harrier looked at her and smiled faintly. "I will if you will."



THE sky was lightening with dawn before the last of the pieces of the *atish'ban*-corpses had been cleared from the battlefield and consumed by fire. Tiercel had named the creatures "Shamblers" and soon it was a naming that everyone used, for to use such a new name was better than to hold upon the tongue and in the heart the knowledge that Ahairan had taken for her own that which should have been left to return to the desert in payment for all that its owner had taken from the desert in his or her years of life. Shaiara hoped that never would there be need of it again, save to speak of things which lay in the past.

When the total of their dead was reckoned, it was not as great as Shaiara had feared it must be, though it was heavy enough. The greatest part of the losses had fallen to the tents of the Lanzanur, whose people had followed Zanattar and fought beside him, but their other losses were cause enough for sorrow.

The Kamazan were gone. No more would Sathan argue with Anipha over goats or sheep, and the name of Kamazan itself would be entered upon the tally of the Lost Tribes, its name set beside so many others to be read out at the Gathering of the Tribes, should there ever be another. *Ummara* Luthurm of the Adanate had followed *Ummara* Kanarab into death less than a moonturn after becoming *Ummara* of the Adanate, along with thirty-six of his people. If the Adanate could not now find among themselves someone they could agree upon for their *Ummara*—and who would agree to become *Ummara*—they must either seek outside themselves for such a one . . . or the surviving Adanate must seek another tribe to join with and the name of Adanate must be set beside the name of Kamazan upon the tally of Lost Tribes.

But despite a night which harrowed the heart even as it wearied the body, the first dimming of the stars saw the tents being struck and the *shotors* packed and saddled. No one wished to remain in this place.



The Slow War

WHEN THEY STOPPED to make midday camp, Harrier had taken Shaiara aside.

"I want to speak to everyone—*Ummarai*, *chaharums*—before we break camp today," he said. "And Zanattar."

Were he Isvaieni, Shaiara would have been able to know already what lay within his mind at this speaking. With Harrier, she could not guess. "What is it that you will say?" she had asked cautiously.

"That your peoples' way of doing things isn't working. It's time to try mine."

Now the *Ummarai* and *chaharums* were all gathered together beneath the canopy of the largest tent. Even so, the space was crowded, for Harrier had insisted that all who spoke for the tribes be present. Many also stood outside the tent to listen. Shaiara could sense their restlessness. It was oddly unsettling to begin such a speaking without the ritual cup of *kaffeyah*, but Shaiara did not think that even Fannas possessed any stores of *kaffeyah* now.

"Since we left Telinchechitl, we've lost one thousand, four hundred, and eighteen people to Ahairan's attacks. We have another six hundred and four people riding with us who're permanently maimed. Last night, Ahairan attacked us using a new creature—Shamblers—using a new kind of spell: anyone a Shambler kills becomes a Shambler. Bisochim can't undo the magic that makes them move and fight, and if he can't, I can't. You all know how difficult it is to cut up the fresh ones. Without wood they'll be hard to burn, and we're out of wood. If we don't burn them when we can, Ahairan will be able to use them again."

His audience stirred uncomfortably. Harrier was telling them nothing more than what they all knew.

"Ahairan's taking bodies from the *Iteru*-cities. Those catch fire easily, but if she can make even half of those dead into Shamblers, she can send . . . about thirty-six thousand Shamblers against us."

There was a moment of silence, then everyone in the tent began talking at once. Harrier let the shouts and recriminations and arguments go on for a few minutes before he began gesturing for silence. When no one heeded him, he got to his feet. "*Shut up!*" he shouted, loud enough to be heard, but he had only shouted to be heard, and as soon as he had silence, he continued.

"This is not about what Zanattar did, and this is not about what Bisochim did. This is about what we will do now. There are less than nine thousand of us. We're running out of arrows and spears. You already know how little food we have. If Bisochim is killed, we won't have water. I can't make grass grow in an hour or two even with all of you to share the spell-cost."

"Tell us something we don't know yet, Harrier of the Cold North!" Sathan called to him.

"I'm not done yet," Harrier said quietly. "We've faced Balwarta and Sandwalkers and Black Dogs and Goblins and *atish'ban*-bugs and now Shamblers. The thing is—I know you know this—Ahairan doesn't care about any of you. Not really. She'll torture you and kill you because she's a Demon and that's what she does. But she's doing this so Bisochim—or Tiercel—or I—will bow down to her and worship her to make it stop. And we won't. We'll die first."

There was utter silence in the tent now. Even the crowd outside, which had been relaying the words of those inside the tent to those further back, was silent.

"Nothing that I told you back in Telinchechitl has changed. None of the three of us can destroy Ahairan. We need to get word to Vairindiel Elvenqueen. Her Elven Mages can—I *hope*—Bind Ahairan until someone can destroy her. But whether they can or not, just warning people about her is just as important. If no one knows that Ahairan is loose, she wins, because she can do whatever she wants to, and . . . And it will be just like *The Tale of Anigrel the Black*. No one knew what he was, and he nearly destroyed everything." Harrier stopped, staring up at the canopy of the tent for a long moment before he went on. "The Elven Lands are a long way away, and Pelashia's Veil is meant to keep people out, not let them in. I think I could pass the Veil—but even so, Karahelanderialigor is semignights away, and Tiercel's the one the Elves will listen to, not me. Our best chance of warning someone and getting the help we need is to get to Armethalieh. But you need to know: even if we can reach Saphthiruk Oasis and resupply, Akazidas'Iteru is two, maybe three, moonturns north of that. We'll probably still run out of food before we get there even if we eat the *shotors*, but most of you won't have to worry about that because you'll already be dead. If any of you survive to reach Akazidas'Iteru, Ahairan will probably kill you rather than let any of us leave the Madiran. So . . . I can't ask any of you to come with us."

"The Hinturi will not turn aside from the path you have chosen, Harrier," Bakhudun said.

At Bakhudun's words, others shifted, preparing to speak. Once again Harrier held up his hands for silence. "This is not some kind of stupid game to see who's braver," he said, and for the first time there was anger in his voice. "Look at the people beside you. All of you. There's someone on your left. There's someone on your right. If you reach Akazidas'Iteru, neither of them will. That's how many—at least how many—of you are going to die. You can't live in the Isvai. But Ahairan may not have stripped the Tereymils. Anyone who heads east might have a chance. I give you fair warning: Ahairan may simply kill anyone who leaves us here. But I know—and so do you—that in the end she'll kill everyone who stays." Harrier stared down at the carpet for a long moment. "In the Barahileth you all promised to come to Armethalieh with me. I'm giving you back that promise now—all of you. You don't have to."

This time the silence that followed his words stretched unbroken for long moments, as no *Ummara* wished to be the first either to follow Bakhudun's pledge to remain—or to be the first to say that they would go. In the last moment before the charged silence would have been broken by the voices of others, Liapha spoke. "Surely this is not all you wished to say to us, Harrier?" she asked brightly,

"No, that's . . . If anybody decides to come with us, they have to behave like an actual army. Watches and herd-guards and camp patrols. Supplies—everything we'd have—held in common and shared equally, because I don't want to hear about tribes, and I don't want to hear about the Time of the Breaking of Tribes. I'm sick of both." He scrubbed his hand over his hair, pushing his *chadar* back to lie around his shoulders, and looked around at the men and women sitting in the tent. "You wouldn't like it, Liapha. None of you would."

Liapha's eyes flashed dangerously, and she pulled herself to her feet with an effort, leaning heavily upon her *Ummara*'s staff. "And I say to you, Harrier Blue Robe, that there is little at all to 'like' in any of this. I raised up my heir since he took his first steps, and his body is ash upon the wind. Where are my daughters and my sons and their children, my brothers and sisters and their children, and *their* children? All dead—save one who is not Kadyastar! And so I say to you: the Kadyastar will not

seek to save an empty name and lives that such a choice would leach of meaning! We ride with you, even though all that we are should be scoured from the Isvai as if by the Sandwind itself. Others must find their own truth.”



“ARE you sure you’re . . .” Tiercel asked hesitantly.

“All right? Not crazy? Got any idea of what I’m doing?” Harrier asked. “Wait until Liapha finds out I want her to cut all those Dark-damned bells off the Kadyastar saddles.”

“Be serious,” Tiercel said, sitting down beside him on the carpet in front of their tent.

The “midday halt” had stretched on into the afternoon and on toward the evening as the *Ummarai* and *chaharums* argued. Tiercel hadn’t known what Harrier had wanted to talk about to everyone this afternoon. He’d just assumed it was something about arrows, since everyone was running low by now and if the Shamblers could be killed—well, *stopped*—with fire, they needed to be able to make fire arrows. He’d been stunned to find out that apparently Harrier had intended to tell the Isvaieni they were all going to die and to suggest that this would be a good time for everyone to take off in the opposite direction from wherever he, Harrier, and Bisochim and Saravasse were going, despite the fact that Ahairan would kill them if they did.

He hadn’t gotten the chance last night to tell Harrier about his suspicion that he was still having visions of Ahairan. Now he was glad he hadn’t, since Harrier had apparently *gone crazy*.

“I *am* serious,” Harrier said. “It’s not so much that they make it impossible to *hear* anything—although they do—as that they make it easy—easier—for anything to hear us.”

“You didn’t—did you—mean, I mean . . . everything you said . . .” Tiercel said, stumbling over the words.

“Is true,” Harrier said. “I’m sorry, Tyr.”

“But how can you *know*? Har, I’ve had to help you with your Maths lessons for as long as I can remember.” Yet in the meeting tent, Harrier had reeled off odds and percentages and amounts and probabilities in a way that would have made Master Jorvens Berian stare in amazement. It seemed utterly insane to be bringing up Armethalieh Normal School here and now, but Tiercel couldn’t stop thinking about it, as if thinking about the past would let him open a door and go there. He imagined a Windrack two years ago, when he and Harrier were sitting in the back of the classroom (because Harrier always refused to sit at the front, and so Tiercel sat with him in the back) as Master Berian was lecturing them on Maths. The windows would have been open, and the soft spring breeze would have been blowing through the window, and Harrier would be paying far more attention to whatever was going on outside than what was happening at the front of the room—at least until Master Berian noticed.

“And then after Old Berian finished yelling at me, I’d go down to the Docks and spend a couple of bells calculating how many tons of cargo could fit into how many square feet of hull without sending the ship to the bottom of Armethalieh Harbor,” Harrier said patiently. “I got it right, too—because Cargomaster Tamarians would skin me when I didn’t. I was just never any good with stupid books full of made-up problems about things that weren’t real.”

“This is real,” Tiercel said unhappily.

“It is,” Harrier agreed.

“They’re still arguing,” Tiercel added.

“Yeah,” Harrier said. He looked up at the evening sky. “I’ll give them another hour, then I’m leaving with whoever wants to come along.”



TIERCEL hadn’t believed he’d do it. No matter how stubborn Harrier got when he got mad, there were some things too important to lose your temper over, and Harrier had been saying from the beginning—he’d even told them again today—that the only value the Isvaieni had to Ahairan was as hostages. If Harrier let anyone who wanted to just *leave*—and Tiercel thought that Sathan would be taking the Barantar away even if no one else left—then he was just abandoning them to Ahairan. But an hour later, the Nalzindar campsite was packed and ready to load, and Harrier was going down to the *shotor* grounds to get their *shotors*, just as if it were any evening.

There were four fewer Nalzindar than there’d been yesterday at this time, and one of the dead—Tanje!—had been twelve. Tiercel wondered if that was part of the reason Harrier had said what he had today.

“You can’t do this,” he said to Harrier.

“Watch me,” Harrier said. He didn’t slow down, but he didn’t speed up either. He just kept walking.

“Oh, for Light’s sake! Be reasonable, Har! Will you—most of the tents aren’t even struck yet!” Some of the tents that had been put up for midday shelter were down. But not many.

“They might be staying here. Or heading east,” Harrier said, still calmly. “The Tereymils are east. I told them there might be game and water there.”

Tiercel speeded up until he could jump in front of Harrier and force him to stop. “Look, I—*Look*. You can’t do this. You know that anyone who goes off by themselves is just going to be killed by Ahairan. Nothing’s changed.”

“Everything’s changed,” Harrier said, still in that too-calm voice. “You know, Tyr, I didn’t plan on leading the Isvaieni *anywhere*. Telinchechitl was drying up, you didn’t come back, Shaiara, Ciniran, and I couldn’t just go back to Abi’Abadshar because we thought Zanattar might follow us there and kill everybody. So I said I’d take the Isvaieni back into the Isvai and hey, maybe by then you’d show up again with Elven Mages and you and I could go home. But when you came back you told me that you hadn’t warned anybody and Saravasse couldn’t fly. And Ahairan was hitting the caravans and people were dying. And we got back to the Isvai and found out that *nobody* could live here now. And Ahairan keeps killing people, and she’s going to keep on killing people, and you know what? Not only do I have no idea of why she’s bothering with us instead of going north, I can think of three ways right now that she could get exactly what she wants.”

“And letting everybody die? That’s the answer?” Tiercel asked, angry and confused.

“No. What’s the difference between High Magick and the Wild Magic? The most basic difference? The one that underlays everything?” Harrier asked.

“I, uh . . . You—You want me to *tell* you?” Tiercel stammered in disbelief. He couldn’t figure out where Harrier was leading with this abrupt change of subject.

That got him a tight unhappy smile from Harrier. “I know. Do you?”

“Um, well, the Wild Magic came first, and . . . A lot of the spells are different, and . . . High Magick involves a lot more equipment, the results are exactly the same every time you do a spell, and, um, you have to study—for years, actually—to learn the High Magick, and then you need a source of spell-energy . . .” his voice trailed off and he tried not to think about Ancaladar.

“Not those,” Harrier said after a moment’s pause, and Tiercel knew that Harrier was thinking of Ancaladar too. “Something else. And I know this is going to sound really stupid—especially coming from me—but . . . With the Wild Magic, you have to *ask*.”

“‘Ask?’” Tiercel repeated blankly.

“Ask,” Harrier said. “Permission. From someone even if you want to Heal them—if you possibly can—from anybody you want to have share in the spell-cost of a spell—no matter what. Even if it’s something they’d want, even if you think they’d say ‘yes’ later. You have to ask. *That’s* the difference between Wild Magic and High Magick.”

“I always asked,” Tiercel said defensively.

“I know,” Harrier said quietly. “But you didn’t have to. And I think a Dragonbond has to be different anyway, because Saravasse didn’t want to help Bisochim call up Ahairan, but because of the Bond, he could still use her. But he’s still a Wildmage. He should have asked,” Harrier added softly.

“So—It’s—But—You’re sending them off to be killed because you’re a *Wildmage*?” Tiercel demanded, keeping his voice down with an effort. But the more he thought about it, he knew that couldn’t be right. “You’re giving them a choice,” he finally said.

“Yeah,” Harrier answered.



WHEN Harrier, Tiercel, and Bisochim and Saravasse left the encampment, only the Nalzindar, the Kadyastar, the Hinturi, and the remains of the Adanate rode with them. The Adanate hadn’t chosen a new *Ummara*, but they’d agreed that Karufhad would speak for them until they chose one or were agreed that they couldn’t choose. Karufhad herself—so she told Harrier when she came to tell him that the Adanate would ride with him—didn’t want to become *Ummara* of the Adanate.

“You might as well,” Harrier answered dismissively. “I meant what I said back there. No more tribes. No more fighting with each other.”

“So said Bisochim,” Karufhad said. “And then—so spoke my son when he returned to me—Zanattar said the Young Hunters must become an army.”

Harrier just laughed. It shocked Tiercel—he’d been expecting anything else. Anger. Argument. Defensiveness. “And Bisochim lied to you and called up a Demon—because the Demon had lied to *him*. And Zanattar turned the Young Hunters into an army and they murdered thousands of innocent people. And we’re all probably going to be dead a moonturn from now. And meanwhile we’re going to be an army,” Harrier said.

Karufhad nodded—just as if what Harrier said had actually made sense to her—and turned her *shotor* back to rejoin the other Adanate. And either Tiercel could go with them, or he could fling himself down from his *shotor* and say he wouldn’t go *anywhere* until Harrier came to his senses. And deep inside, he was a little afraid that Harrier wouldn’t let him do that. So he rode along with everyone else, unable to decide whether he was being a coward or not.

A couple of hours later, Saravasse announced that she heard something behind them. When Harrier and the Nalzindar circled around to the back of the little caravan, Tiercel went too. In the distance, very faintly, he could hear the sound of saddle-bells, and the disgruntled bleating of goats.



BY the time they moved on again, the desert where they’d stopped was littered with bells, and nearly all the Isvaieni had rejoined Harrier. The Kareggi were among those who’d come, which surprised Tiercel, since apparently Fannas had complained up one street and down the next about Harrier’s behavior from before they’d all left Telinechitil. The Thanduli had stayed behind, but *Ummara* Ogmazad of the Tabingana said that *Ummara* Calazir of the Thanduli was still making up his mind what to do.

Most of the delay in the departure of the rest of the tribes had been caused by arguments about the allotment of the remaining livestock. When Harrier’s party had left, Harrier had simply seized what he considered a fair number of the herd animals, choosing a number by the number of people going with him, but Sathan seemed to be arguing ownership rights to specific sheep and goats and *shotors*. It hadn’t—quite—come to violence, but Sathan certainly hadn’t been let to keep even a fraction of the animals he’d claimed.

“How should he?” Ogmazad said reasonably. “In a moonturn the Barantar will reach good hunting. Or they will be dead.”

The Barantar and the Binrazan were the only two tribes determined to stay behind, and *Ummara* Phulda of the Binrazan had spoken of heading east. Some of the Barantar and the Binrazan, from what Tiercel could figure out from the brief conversation he’d overheard between Harrier and Zanattar before the caravan moved on, had become Lanzanur really quickly in order to follow Zanattar, because Zanattar—and *Ummara* Kataduk of the Lanzanur, whom Zanattar had stayed behind to escort—were following Harrier.

Tiercel wanted to say they should go back and try again to reason with the holdouts. He knew that Sathan wouldn’t listen, but now that *Ummara* Calazir and *Ummara* Phulda had seen that almost everyone else intended to keep going north, surely they’d want the Thanduli and the Binrazan to go too. Even if Harrier didn’t want to turn back and lose a whole night’s travel, Tiercel and Bisochim and Saravasse could get back to the last campsite in less than an hour. Tiercel was sure he could persuade the Binrazan and the Thanduli to come along if he reminded them that the Isvaieni were Ahairan’s hostages, and that if she couldn’t kill them—slowly—in front of Bisochim, she’d have no reason to let them live at all.

Tiercel wondered, thinking that, if Harrier had thought this puzzle out to its logical end. Why should Ahairan let him—or Bisochim, or any of the Isvaieni—escape to warn someone? Why should she leave *anyone* alive at all?

It isn’t just my own life I have to be willing to give up, Tiercel realized with a thrill of revulsion. If they were all going to die *anyway*, shouldn’t they make their plans on that assumption? In *shamat*, you sacrificed the lesser pieces to defend the greater ones, and people weren’t playing pieces, but . . .

Were they all trying to stay alive? Or were they trying to save the Light from the Dark? They weren’t the same goals. They couldn’t be accomplished in the same ways. In fact . . . they probably weren’t both things you could try to accomplish at the same time.

Does Harrier know that? Tiercel wondered. This had been supposed to be *his* fight, Tiercel thought. Since the first time he’d had a vision of Ahairan and Telinechitil—before he’d been able to put names to them—he’d known it was his fight, but all he’d done was wander around in circles as if he had all the time in the world, because he was too *afraid* to do what had to be done. He’d had sennights to think of a proper defense for Tarnatha’Iteru—or to *leave*—because Tarnatha’Iteru was one city, and stopping Ahairan before she could destroy *all* cities was more important. And he hadn’t. He got to Abi’Abadshar, and he’d had a *trail* leading right to Telinechitil, and he hadn’t taken it. He’d delayed—out of fear—and lost Ancaladar, and gave Bisochim time to release Ahairan, and the fact that they were all going to die now wasn’t even the worst part.

The worst part was that Tiercel thought Harrier was making the same mistakes he had.

And he didn’t think he could stop him.



AHAIRAN had become weary of these creatures—wary, and perhaps a little uneasy at the long boring sennights of what had been meant to be a quick and entertaining game. Though she had sworn to the Firecrown in the blood of the Wildmage Kanash that she would have all three of the Mages to serve her, Kanash’s death had made her wary: the Creatures of Form were fragile and easy to destroy, and she dared not attempt to force their compliance by bespelling them directly, only by acting against that which they seemed to value.

At first she had believed it would be a simple matter to bring He-Who-Had-Called-Her and those he valued to heel, for all the Life Ahairan had come to know possessed an intense desire to remain alive. Ahairan and her kin in the Shadow World made constant war upon one another, judging weakness with avid and inhuman senses: just as they had sensed the flaw in He-Who-Had-Called-Her when his mind first touched theirs, so she judged the flesh-creatures now. Of the three Mages she must suborn to gain victory over the Firecrown, He-Who-Had-Called-Her was weakest, for rage and humiliation—emotions Ahairan now understood well, though emotion itself was as new to her as the body she wore—filled his body more completely than breath or blood. But while these intoxicating sensations strengthened her, they only weakened him. For that reason, she had been certain he would swiftly fall, and in the moment that He-Who-Had-Called-Her became her servant, she could have left to him the task of causing the other two to swear eternal fealty to her.

But to Ahairan's disquiet, her plan was not proceeding in the fashion she had so confidently predicted. These creatures—the ones capable of wielding magic—seemed to willfully embrace their own destruction. She had even crafted new spells so that the forms of the once-living would move at her command, displaying the terrifying extent of her power to those who yet lived. But the Mages and those whom they led were not like all the other Life that Ahairan had taken and used for her own purposes. Unlike Ahairan and her kindred, the three Mages who were her prey seemed to draw strength from one another. Despite all she had done, He-Who-Had-Called-Her had not petitioned her in submission and worship—none of them had. He-Who-Had-Called-Her might even cease to live before he recognized his oversight, and did he—did *any* of them—do so, her game—and her chance to enslave the Firecrown as well—was lost. The terms of the covenant she had entered into was explicit: only when all three Mages served her, would it serve her as well.

She might renounce that bargain—yet to do so would be to admit she could not fulfill it, and Ahairan's pride would not allow her to make such an admission. She could display her power to the Mages directly—force them to expend every spell they possessed against her, show them it was useless, even carry one or all of them off to imprison them in her tower of glass, as she had done to Kanash.

Yet Kanash had become no longer alive when she had done that.

And so Ahairan toyed with her *atish'ban*, growing increasingly frustrated and increasingly bored, and brooded upon how best to force He-Who-Had-Called-Her to bend to her will.

And then Ahairan discovered an unlooked-for gift that did much to ease her boredom.



UMMARA Sathan was not a fool. Any person of wisdom could see that this road the Blue Robes led them upon was one that would end with all the people laying their bones upon the sand, and that without having brought help from the Elder Kin, nor even having carried warning to the Cold North. Yet he had pledged his word to the undertaking, and he and his people would keep it, for a word once given could not be taken back, no matter how heavy a weight it became upon the shoulders of the giver. And so the Barantar had done all that was asked of them. . . until the day that the mad northern Wildmage Harrier of the Two Swords had given Sathan his word back.

Sathan would not offer it twice.

It mattered not to him that only the Thanduli and the Binrazan were the Barantar's equals in wisdom. It would have been useful did the Kareggi share their good judgment, for even now the Kareggi were numerous, and for that reason Sathan was forced to endure the madness of seeing his flocks and herds stolen by others who said that numbers and need, not right, must determine who might own a goat or a sheep or a *shotor*.

Let it be so. Was there not a city deep in the Barahileth where no Demon could come? A city protected by ancient magic, filled with *iterus* of sweet water, with flocks of every sort of beast and orchards of fruit, where the Barantar might shelter in safety? To this place he would lead his people, to reclaim their children and outwait the winds of madness. Let the Binrazan do as Harrier had bid them, as if they still rode at his side and heeded his counsel. Let the Thanduli sit upon their carpets in endless debate. The Barantar would ride the paths of wisdom.

They were not able to depart the camp until the night was halfway done, for Sathan did not wish to say to *Ummara* Phulda why the Barantar did not travel east with the Binrazan. Instead, Sathan let Phulda believe that the Barantar would stay there another day, and so the Binrazan departed, and still the Barantar remained. And when the Thanduli tents were dark with sleep, Sathan led his people to fold their tents and saddle their *shotors*. To *Ummara* Calazir, when he came to ask what the Barantar meant by this going forth in the hours of sleep, Sathan said that he had thought again and meant now to follow *Ummara* Phulda at once. Had *Ummara* Calazir been more inclined to go after the Blue Robes than to go east, Sathan would have said that he meant to follow the Wildmages instead.

It was not possible upon their departure to claim all the animals that were rightfully theirs, for when the others had left, the remaining animals had been divided—improperly!—and jealously watched. But Sathan consoled himself with that which the Nalzindar had said—speaking of the beasts that lay within the Demon City to feed the children of all the tribes—the knowledge that there were many fat goats in Abi'Abadshar, free to any who had need of them. In Abi'Abadshar, Sathan and his tribe would have need. And numbers.

As soon as they were far enough away from the camp that their words would not be heard, Sathan said to his *chaharums*, Razinda and Tagora, that the Demon would surely continue to attack the Blue Robes and those who rode with them, and so the Barantar need fear nothing save empty bellies. In his heart, Sathan did not know whether he spoke truth or folly, but he knew that fear was too great a weight for a *shotor* to carry. In his mind lay the thought that they must now travel past the place of the slaughter of the Shamblers, to the nightspring Bisochim had made before that place, and there stop and butcher the sheep and goats that they possessed, and as many of their *shotors* as they dared. Then they must travel quickly, retracing the caravan's path to the Dove Road itself.

They were but three handspans of night upon the road when Sathan heard the first howl in the distance. There was a moment's silence, then the first voice was answered—joined—by a chorus of others.

"So Luthurm did not receive a true Foretelling," Razinda said from where she rode beside him. "For there are no wolves where there is not that which wolves may slay."

"Think you that Bisochim's Foretelling was false?" Tagora asked with interest. "How shall that be, when he is a great Wildmage who—"

"Be silent, both of you," Sathan commanded. Razinda and Tagora were *chaharums* of worth to the Barantar precisely because they could be sure never to agree upon any matter, yet this was a moment for silence, not for counsel.

The howling came again, and closer. The *shotors* were restless now, sensing trouble, and the goats—content so far to walk along beside the *shotors* with the sheep—were looking about restlessly and starting to scatter. Riders from the column behind the herd animals began moving out across the desert to guide the animals back into place.

It seemed very dark without Coldfire to light their way.

"Has that the sound of wolves to you?" Sathan asked his *chaharums* quietly.

"No," Razinda said. Her eyes were wide with fear that she would not allow into her voice. "Dog. Perhaps."

"Leave the animals." Sathan raised his voice in a shout. "*Leave them!*"

He forced his *shotor* to turn and trot back up the column, calling to his people to run, leave the sheep, the goats, to drop the lead-ropes of the pack animals, *run* . . .

The *shotors* needed little encouragement to run, and Sathan blessed the fortunate star that had seen the *shotors* well-fed and well-watered for so many days. If that which followed them was satisfied to make its meal on their herd-beasts the Barantar might yet live on. And then—for now Sathan's *shotor* followed all the rest—he looked behind him and knew that they would not.

The Black Dogs had attacked the Isvaieni only once before, but that was a night that every Isvaieni would remember and mourn—should any of them be so fortunate as to endure—even when other deaths and losses had been made dim and dull by the passage of time. Upon that night their *ikullas* had saved the Isvaieni only at the price of their own lives, so savage and implacable had been the foe that they faced. Then, the Black Dogs had attacked in a terrible silence. Now, they gave tongue like a pack of wolves harrying their prey before them.

Sathan saw the doom of the Barantar in quick glances over his shoulder. He saw that the Black Dogs did not turn aside to slay the scattered sheep and goats, nor to attack the pack *shotors* that fell behind the others. The Dogs were no more than seven, but they were enough to compass the death of all his people, if in no other way than by driving their *shotors* to exhaustion and letting the Isvai itself finish the work they had begun.

I have done this, Sathan thought in a moment of cold anger. It mattered not that the Northern Blue Robe was a mad fool leading them all into death. He had spoken words of hard wisdom also. There had been two roads leading to Death's Oasis, and in his pride Sathan had chosen the worse for himself and for the Barantar.

He drew his *geschak* and cut his *shotor's* throat.

Impossible to make it stop and kneel as it fled, panic-stricken, with the Black Dogs at its heels. This was the only way. Even dying it ran on for a score of paces, but when it crashed to its knees at last, Sathan was ready. He vaulted from the saddle, drawing his *awardan* in one fluid motion, and turned to face the pack. Each moment his death could buy his people was a precious hope of life.

Not one of the Black Dogs stopped. All ran on, leaving Sathan standing there.

"You are he who leads them, are you not?" a voice asked from behind him.

Sathan spun around, his sword still at the ready.

A woman in robes as red as blood sat upon the back of a *shotor* whose coat was as black as a starless sky. He had barely taken in the sight—attempting to convince himself that here was Ahairan, the Demon who had slain so many Isvaieni—before the *atish'ban-shotor* was kneeling and she was stepping gracefully from its back.

Sathan had not ridden with Zanattar's great army. He had never slain man or woman. But two nights past he had taken his *awardan* to many bodies with the seeming of man and woman, made to move and slay by this creature's magic. And so he rushed forward now, his *awardan* raised to strike. But before his blow could fall, his weapon shimmered and changed in his hand. Where hard metal blade and rough bone hilt had been, Sathan felt the flex of scale and muscle against his palm, and when he looked, he saw that he held no *awardan*, but a desert adder, coiling and writhing and preparing to strike. He flung it from him with a cry, and as it struck the sand, he looked toward it and saw that it was *awardan* once more, unchanged.

Ahairan laughed, and her laughter was sweet and cold. "You creatures have such simple minds. No," she said, as Sathan moved toward his weapon to take it back once more, "it could not harm me even had your blow fallen. But you did not answer me."

Sathan forced himself to stop and look upon her face, knowing that there lived a craven wish within his heart that to gaze upon such an unclean thing would strike him dead. But her face was beautiful and her form was that of a young woman. Only her eyes were wrong, with fire in their depths as a beast's would glow.

In the distance the night was foul with the shrieks of *shotors* in their death agonies and the cries of his people. He fell to his knees. "I am *Ummara* of the Barantar," he said, bowing his head. "Tell me what I must do to save my people."

"Walk with me, *Ummara* of the Barantar," Ahairan said, holding out her hand to him.

She meant him to take her hand, and so Sathan got to his feet and did, as if he were her *Ummara* leading her from the pledging-tent to disclose before the people that a new marriage had been made. But when he set his palm against hers it was as if he had set his palm upon a sheet of metal new-plucked from a bed of coals, and when he tried to wrench his hand free, her fingers closed over his in a grip he could not break.

"Walk with me, Sathan," Ahairan said again.



TO be a child of the Isvai was to be strong. All his life, Sathan had been told that there were a thousand paths that led away from the tents of the Isvaieni. One might leave one's own tribe and join another with softer ways. One might leave the Isvai and go to live in one of the *Iteru-cities*, to sleep in a soft bed and never fear Sandwind or hunger or thirst or the heat of the sun. To gain the freedom and beauty of the Deep Desert, the price the Isvaieni paid was in the coin of pain and loss and uncertainty. Sathan was no stranger to any of these. The pain in his hand—as if he'd plunged it into a basket of red coals—was agony greater than any he had ever known. And yet this pain was as nothing to the horror of the Demon's words.

"It is good that you have come to me, Sathan, for I become weary with waiting for He-Who-Has-Called-Me to bow down and worship me. Only when he has done so can there be a new race of Demons to claim this world and rule over it forever. I want it to be him because he dared to defy me. Do you know that he stopped me from causing you all to cease to live on the day he brought me into the World of Form? I could do that now. It would not be difficult. But should I cause all of you to cease to live, then He-Who-Has-Called-Me will not bow down and worship me. You must tell me why he will not do as I wish, Sathan. I must know his secrets."

She looked toward him, her expression holding nothing other than curiosity, and Sathan opened his mouth—wanting desperately to answer, to *tell* her—but all he could do was moan in pain. No matter how firmly he tried to hold the lesson of the *awardan* before his mind as he stumbled across the sand beside the Demon, to tell himself that what he felt was illusion, was trickery, his nose was filled with the scent of his own roasting flesh and he could do no other than *believe*.

Ahairan nodded to herself, just as if she'd received a reply. "I must be careful. For so very long we could only make him do what we wanted by saying to him that it was to keep you from ceasing to live, or the Creature of Magic from ceasing to live." She tightened her grip upon his hand and beneath the bright pain of burning Sathan thought he felt bones give way. "But he will not know, now, if you who are here cease to live. And so it will not matter to him."

Sathan closed his eyes. Tears more of shame than of pain spilled down his cheeks. Sennight after sennight, he and others had mocked the fair-haired northern Mage-without-true-magic for being soft and foolish—yet Tiercel of the Cold North had sworn to die rather than bow down to Ahairan, even though he had looked upon her face. Bisochim had fought her and defied her and had made the same vow. And Sathan wanted to be as strong—but his mind was filled with all the things he could offer Ahairan, the promises he could make her, if *only she would let him and his people go*.

"If we die here—you cannot kill us in front of him," he managed to choke out.

"What do you matter? He has others!" Ahairan cried. Without releasing his hand, she spun to face him and backhanded him across the face. The force of the blow drove him to his knees. Sathan felt bone give and his mouth filled with blood. And still she clutched at his hand, squeezing it tighter as she raged. "Hundreds! *Thousands!* I could walk this World of Form each day until you *stopped* and on each of those days I could make a thousand of your kind cease to live and there would still be *more!* And here—even *here!*—I could enter the minds of those who sleep in the shadow of He-Who-Has-Called-Me—thinking themselves safe, as you thought them endangered—and with each dawn I could call upon one of them to cease to be, and the last one would not be gone until so many days had passed as He-Who-

Has-Called-Me spent in summoning me!”

Sathan wanted to beg, to plead, to bargain. He could not make Bisochim do what she wanted—and he blessed Sand and Star for that—but he feared that she could see deeply enough into his heart and mind to discover where Abi’Abadshar lay. At least he could not tell her. No longer did his jaw obey his commands. When he tried to move it, there was nothing but bright pain and a grinding of shattered bone.

Abruptly Ahairan released his hand. He would have fallen upon his face in the sand but for the fact that she knelt quickly, straddling his thighs, plucking his *geschak* from his sash and setting it into his undamaged hand. Their faces were only inches apart, and he could see now what he had not seen before. Her eyes were not dark like those of all the people of the south, but the bright pale gold of a bird’s.

“It is possible that you do not believe me, Sathan. Your World of Form is very strange: there are so many words and names, and yet none of them are true words and true names. But all of my words are true ones, Sathan. Here, I will show you. Take this knife and cut out your heart.” Her voice was calm and quiet now, the voice of a parent providing a necessary lesson—and not one over-harsh—to a beloved child.

Sathan did not intend his hand to tighten upon the hilt of the *geschak*, to raise it to hook it through the neck of his tunic and cut the tunic open to the waist, to raise the blade again to the neck of his undertunic and cut it, too, open from neck to waist. All the while, blood dripped from his half-open mouth to his skin, to his hands, to the hand that held the knife. He had no more control over that hand, that knife, than he would have had if they had belonged to another.

But he could still scream



BOTH Razinda and Tagora had ridden forth from Telinchechitl among the Young Hunters, and so when Harrier of the Two Swords led them forth from Telinchechitl again, Razinda held close to her heart the hope that once they returned to the Isvai, the long moonturns of battle and killing could become no more than an evil dream. But the shame of the Isvaieni’s folly could only be washed clean in vows that set their feet upon a New War Road, though it was a war that both the Blue Robes said no man or woman could win. For that cause, there had been joy in the hearts of all the Barantar to be given their vow back again, that they might come away from that dark path and seek instead a path of peace.

Razinda knew now that peace was not to be. But the Barantar might yet hope for life. When Sathan had ordered them to abandon all their chattels and possessions and flee, neither Razinda nor Tagora had questioned his word, for as much as one of them might say that a goat in twilight was white only to have the other swear it was black, neither lacked for wisdom. Razinda knew that whatever manner of beast harried them—wolf or *pakh* or even Black Dog—it could be slain by spear and arrow, and *Ummara* Sathan had made sure that their reserves of both were ample. When the fleeing *shotors* wearied enough to be governed, then would be the time for the Barantar to arm themselves and attack.

There was no orderly column of *shotors* now. The animals ran in a long ragged line as wide-spread as the wings of a soaring falcon. At its point ran the fastest animals, and at the trailing ends of the wings ran the slowest. Both Razinda and Tagora were near the center, and they darted quick glances from side to side, watching for *shotors* who might stumble, Barantar who might fall, for the sight of their pursuers closing in to pick off stragglers. Razinda’s mind was so filled with awaiting the moment when she might regain control of her *shotor* that she nearly missed the moment when *something else* did that which she could not do.

Moving as if they were one beast, all the fleeing *shotors* began to wheel in a great circle, turning back in the direction of their pursuers. There was nothing any of their riders could do to stop them; the *shotors* moved as if they ran free and riderless upon the desert. Even the sight of that from which they had been fleeing from so desperately only moments before did not break the terrible spell which held them. When the *shotors* had turned, Razinda saw a pack of Black Dogs trotting toward them across the desert. The Black Dogs were identical in seeming to those which had attacked the Isvaieni while they were yet in the Barahileth, but this time they did not come in a pack numbering in the hundreds. There were but seven of the Dogs, and forty Barantar for each of them.

For the first time Razinda felt a surge of hope. Their losses would be heavy. But there was a chance for life.

“Loose your arrows!” Tagora shouted. “We know they can be killed!”

Razinda raised her bow and fired.

As the *shotors* had wheeled, their headlong flight had slowed, and now—still moving as one—they halted. For a moment Razinda was grateful, and then she realized her *shotor* could not be made to move again by any encouragement. Nor was a black animal as easy to see at night when there were not globes of Coldfire to illuminate the desert. Razinda did not know whether she struck what she was aiming at.

Moving with deceptive slowness, one of the Black Dogs reached her *shotor* and sprang up to seize the animal at the base of its throat. The abrupt impact of the attack staggered the *shotor* and took Razinda by surprise. All she could think of to do was to grasp a handful of her arrows and attempt to drive them into the Black Dog’s eyes, but at the moment her *shotor* was savaged, the eerie spell of calm and silence that had held it was shattered, and it roared and stumbled, attempting to flee and to strike out at its attacker at one and the same time. Razinda was forced to drop her handful of arrows in order to keep from falling from her saddle into the jaws of the Black Dog. In the same moment that the first Dog yanked its bloody mouthful of flesh free, a second darted in, delivering a crushing bite to one of her *shotor’s* forelegs. An instant later, both Black Dogs loped away, leaving Razinda’s crippled and dying *shotor* to stagger a few steps before it collapsed. When it did, Razinda fell heavily from her saddle, sprawling breathlessly upon the sand, but none of the Black Dogs took any interest in her at all. With hands shaking with both fear and rage, Razinda reclaimed her arrows and her bow. She stood and shot at the enemy until her quiver was empty.

Some of the Barantar did as she did. Some leaped down from the backs of their *shotors* before they were attacked and simply ran. Some lay trapped beneath their dead or dying animals. Some attempted to slay the Black Dogs with *awardans*—but one could not slay or even harm a beast that did not stand and fight and was far fleet of foot than its attacker.

Score after score of the Barantar *shotors* fell to the merciless brutality of a predator that did not even stop to feed, and at its end the Barantar became aware that they stood upon the desert in a lake of blood, surrounded by the bodies of dead and dying *shotors*. The whole slaughter had taken less time than it took for the sun to raise its whole disk from the horizon each dawn, and at the moment when the last *shotor* staggered and fell to the *regh* in its death agonies, the Black Dogs raced off into the night.

“We shall walk together back to the place where the Thanduli still set their tents,” Razinda said boldly, though to speak boldly in this uncanny place nearly choked her. “We can reach it before the sun grows too hot. We shall think what to do then.”

“We shall carry our injured with us,” Tagora added.

With so many hands to help, it was quick work to free those who had been trapped beneath their mounts, and by the time they had done so, those who had fled had returned. Less than a score of the Barantar were too badly injured to walk, and it was Tagora’s word that they would be carried in slings made from their cloaks, those slings to be carried by two others, and when they tired, by two more, until they reached the camp of the Thanduli.

“Let us begin,” Tagora said.

“Look,” Hlingot Long-Sight said, pointing. His voice was troubled. “Someone comes. A rider.”

Razinda peered into the distance, and at last saw what Hlingot had seen. She could not see the *shotor* at all, and knew then that its coat must be as dark as the hair of

a black goat. ATISH'BAN, she thought in despair. *Now even our own shotors become ATISH'BAN to plague us?* The *atish'ban-shotor* had a rider, and she could see it clearly, for the rider's robes were red.



Shadow Queen's Gambit

TIERCEL STARTLED AWAKE with a gasp. “We stop soon,” Ciniran said comfortingly.

“No, wait,” he said groggily. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

He started to move—to go *back*—and Ciniran reached out and squeezed his knee. Not hard, but hard enough to bring him further awake. He’d been awake for more than a day—most of them had, between the Shambler attack and Harrier’s stunning proclamation—and Tiercel had fallen asleep in the saddle. He realized that he was riding, that Ciniran was leading his *shotor*, that he wasn’t standing in the middle of the desert, with . . .

“Where are the Barantar?” Tiercel asked, his voice becoming urgent as dream and waking sorted themselves out in his mind. He hoped it was a dream. Or maybe “wished” was the right word, because he already knew it wasn’t. Not really. “Ciniran, where are they?”

Ciniran sighed, though Tiercel knew she didn’t mean him to notice. “With the Thanduli and the Binrazan, perhaps, for none of them is here. They have taken the freedom that Harrier gave to them and embraced folly. It is their right.”

“You don’t understand,” Tiercel said tightly. He wanted to close his eyes—and he didn’t. He was afraid that if he did the screams that only he could hear would become too loud to ignore. “Where’s Harrier?”

Ciniran pointed silently.



HARRIER was at the front of the caravan. Tiercel had gotten so used to the constant soft clamor of saddle bells and the high sweet jingle of bridle bells over the past moonturns that their absence seemed noisy. The only sounds he heard now were the faint complaints of the animals, the creaking of ropes and leather, and a few soft murmurs from nearby Isvaieni.

“We have to go back,” Tiercel said without preamble.

“To talk to Sathan and Phulda and Calazir again?” Harrier asked, as if they’d been in the middle of a conversation. “Tyr, nothing’s changed.”

“No! I mean, *yes!* It has! Sathan—the Barantar—they went south.”

Harrier twisted himself sideways on his saddle to stare at him. “You had a vision,” he said flatly.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I . . . Yes. No. But they went south, and now Ahairan has them—the Barantar—and we have to do something. Har, you know we do!”

Harrier turned away and stared straight ahead, gazing out over the desert ahead. “We are,” he said at last. “We’re going north.”

Tiercel gaped at him for several minutes, trying to make Harrier’s words mean something else. He had to swallow two or three times before his voice was steady enough to speak. “You don’t mean that. You *can’t*. There are almost three hundred of them!”

“Two hundred and eighty-four Barantar after the Shambler attack—assuming a bunch of them didn’t suddenly become Kareggi since midday yesterday. And yes. I do mean that. How many people in Armethalieh? Among the Kareggi? I can’t give you the figures from the last Great Count in the City, but there are eleven hundred and twelve people in Fannas’s tents right now, and that’s just counting the ones who were Kareggi two days ago.”

“That doesn’t—” Tiercel began. *That doesn’t matter when three hundred people—two hundred and eighty-four people—are being tortured to death by a Demon. She feeds on blood and pain and death. I’m the one who told you that, remember?*

“I guess I missed the part where you told me we had a way of stopping her. Killing her. Fighting her,” Harrier’s voice was flat. “Just like you missed the part where it’s killing us just to run away from her. I wish it weren’t happening. And I hope they keep her occupied for a few days so she doesn’t send something else after us.”

“So this is what a Knight-Mage is really like,” Tiercel said, his voice low and ugly. “Forget the Wild Magic, forget about the Balance, just make up your mind you’re going to *do* something and never change it no matter what happens. I guess I know why you hate doing spells so much now, don’t I? They all come with MagePrice—and you’d hate for the Gods of the Wild Magic to order you to do something that got in the way of you getting your own way.” Before Harrier could say anything, Tiercel turned his *shotor* and trotted it to the back of the caravan.



A SHORT while later—long enough for Tiercel to decide he was completely awake, and nowhere near long enough for him to stop seething with rage over what Harrier was doing—the caravan stopped. Nobody dismounted—after the first time they’d almost pitched their camp on top of Sandwalkers, the Isvaieni waited now to find out if a place was safe before beginning to make camp.

Which meant *Harrier* was deciding it was safe, because Bisochim wouldn’t even try to sense the creatures. He said he couldn’t.

They’d all been doing what *Harrier* said, since . . . Tiercel couldn’t really remember. Since he and Shaiara and Ciniran had left Abi’Abadshar to go to Telinchechitl, Tiercel thought. And he couldn’t think of what he would have done differently if he’d had the chance to be the one making all their choices, but he knew he wouldn’t have let Sathan and the others just leave. Harrier had talked about giving all of them a “choice,” when the truth was that Sathan had been arguing with him and everybody else for as far back as Tiercel could remember. Calazir never made up his mind about anything—even Omuta was more decisive—and Phulda of the Binrazan had been so unrealistic about their situation that he’d brought the Binrazan’s looms and dyestuffs all the way across the Barahileth. Harrier was probably glad to be rid of all three of them. As for the rest of the Isvaieni, having been given and having refused one chance to abandon the attempt to reach Armethalieh, they’d be in a much worse position to complain about anything Harrier wanted to order them to do.

And there was no doubt in Tiercel’s mind that Harrier intended to order them to do a lot of things from now on. Why shouldn’t he? Knight-Mages were soldiers, and the Isvaieni were going to become an army whether they wanted to or not. An army could only have one General.

When the caravan finally started moving out of position to make camp, Tiercel received another unpleasant shock—or, rather, a series of them. In themselves—on

some other day—none of them would have been bad or even particularly unsettling. As an indicator of how far Harrier intended to go to turn the Isvaieni into an army, they disturbed him beyond his ability even to put them into coherent thoughts.

Always before—at least for as long as Tiercel had been traveling with them—the Isvaieni tents had been set in a haphazard fashion, with Bisochim's nightspring and the animals' herd-instinct enough to keep the livestock from straying. The nightspring that Bisochim would conjure would always be at one of the outer edges of the camp, the *shotor*-grounds at another.

Not today.

Today, by the time Tiercel had led his *shotor* to the area marked out as the stabling-field, he realized that the tents were being set in a square around almost six hectares of open space. The nightspring stood in the middle, and Bisochim was forcing grass to grow around it. Tiercel could see Harrier hurrying back and forth—obviously telling everybody *exactly* what he wanted them to do—and stopping every now and then to form a ball of Coldfire, as if he knew he ought to be doing that too and was just too busy.

Tiercel didn't want to watch anymore—and he didn't want to hear about how he was just as useless as the people they'd left to die, either. He went back to the *shotor* field and concentrated on making enough balls of Mage-Light to thoroughly illuminate it.

He should have been able to *escape* from Harrier's changes there, but he couldn't. The tents were still going up—set in nice neat rows, with spaces and rows between them, just the way Harrier had been unsuccessfully begging them to arrange them since Tiercel could remember. The organization of the tents made sense—because when the camp was attacked in the middle of the night by whatever Ahairan had come up with this time, that was not the time to be tripping over a tent-rope—but it still infuriated him. And while Tiercel was trying to ignore that, a group of Isvaieni—at least thirty—came down to the *shotor* ground.

There'd always been Night Herd Guards. But to Tiercel's surprise, more than half of the arrivals had saddles and bridles with them, and several of them went through the herd, seeking out *shotors* and urging them to their feet.

"What's going on?" Tiercel asked, walking up to one of the Isvaieni coaxing a *shotor* to its feet. It was someone he recognized: Kuram of the Tunag tribe. Kuram had lost his right hand and most of his forearm when the Black Dogs attacked. Tiercel remembered how shocked he'd been when Ciniran had said, with perfect seriousness, that in another time than this, Kuram would have laid his bones upon the sand if he could not earn his place among the Tunag after such an injury.

"The Wildmage has spoken: we are to ride through the night to watch for the enemy," Kuram said. He lifted a small cylinder on a leather cord that hung about his throat. "Few can hear this, but I will sound it at need. And soon whistles will be crafted that all can hear."

"I suppose that was Harrier's idea too?" Tiercel said bitterly. He had no doubt at all which "Wildmage" it was who had spoken.

Kuram looked surprised at his anger. "No, Tiercel. Ciniran of the Nalzindar is one who can hear the hunting-whistle. It was her word that others should be made, and a good one."

At last the *shotor*, grunting, condescended to rise, and Tiercel followed Kuram as he led her to the edge of the field. Tiercel realized, looking around, that everyone here—the herd guards, and the men and women who were saddling *shotors* and preparing to ride—were all among the permanently injured. Biara was missing an eye and three fingers from her left hand. Zin had lost both legs and got around on crutches made from parts of a tentpole. Jekin had lost his entire arm. Aduni most of one leg. Through the power of the Dragonbond, Bisochim could Heal nearly any injury in ways that were little short of miraculous, but what was gone was gone forever.

"You don't have to be out there all night?" Tiercel asked, still trying to come to terms with the idea that Harrier was making their injured do this dangerous work on top of a long hard day of riding.

"A handspan or two, then off to our beds." Kuram grinned at him and swung himself into the saddle, looping the rein over his stump and taking the *shotor*-goad into his hand. "If you don't step lively, Zin, you lazy half-man, I'll be back and in bed with your wife before you are!"

Zin made a rude gesture toward Kuram and flung his crutches away, setting himself down with practiced ease in his *shotor*'s saddle and drawing up the shortened hem of his robe so that he could tuck the stump of his leg through the leather loop sewn to the forward edge of his saddle. Once his seat was secure, he gathered up reins and goad and clucked to his *shotor* until it rose to its feet. "Half of a good man is better than all of a poor one!" he jeered toward Kuram's retreating back. "Balbat knows that if you don't!"

The other sentries were already riding out two by two. In only a few moments, all of them were gone. Tiercel bent down and picked up the crutches that Zin had dropped. Biara stepped forward, holding out her hand. "I will keep them for him until he comes back," she said. "You should seek your bed, Tiercel. Morning will come too soon."

The last place Tiercel really wanted to be was stuck in a tent with Harrier, but at least it would also be full of Nalzindar. He sighed and nodded.



IT was easier to walk back through the camp tonight, which didn't improve Tiercel's mood. The tents had been grouped in blocks of nine, with lanes between each block. The outermost tents of the outermost block faced the desert; the rest faced the clear space in the center. The new arrangement meant that some tribes—like the Kareggi—overflowed several blocks, while others—like the Nalzindar—didn't even take up a fraction of one block. Tiercel didn't know where the Nalzindar were, but he didn't think even Harrier could convince Shaiara to set her tent on one of the inside blocks, so he simply kept walking around the outside of the camp until he came to something that looked familiar. As he walked, Kuram and Zin passed him, several dozen yards further out. They were quiet and intent, their eyes fixed on the horizon.

When Tiercel finally got to the Nalzindar tent, Ciniran was sitting on the edge of the carpet, coaxing a miserly fire to warm a pan of broth. "Tomorrow at the midday halt we are to see what stocks of foodstuffs remain to each of the tribes and order them for the good of all," she said when she saw him. She made a rude noise of amusement. "Here, it will be a simple matter. There is salt."

"That's all right," Tiercel said. "I'm not really hungry." He was thirsty, though, and at least they still had water—for the moment. He took down one of the waterskins that hung on the outer tentpole, and drank thirstily. After that, he moved to go inside.

"No," Ciniran said, stopping him. "Shaiara says tonight that tent is yours." She pointed to the tent set next to theirs.

Tiercel frowned and shrugged. He hadn't thought—after all the people they'd lost to the Shamblers—there was any point in putting up a second tent, but it wasn't worth arguing over. He walked the few steps to the doorway and ducked inside. Even in the middle of the night cold, the tent smelled of heat, and dust, of the goats and *shotors* whose hair had gone to make the felt of its fabric, and of a faint lingering scent of smoke. By now the tent-smell was familiar and homelike, and it took an effort of memory for Tiercel to summon up the smells of his own bedroom back in Armethalich: the sharp scent of the cedarwood that lined his closet, the sweet soft scent of the beeswax that was used to polish the wooden furniture, the clean sunshine and lavender scent of the linen sheets on his bed . . .

It wasn't an effort he made very often.

One of the bespelled lanterns hung from the center tentpole. It didn't give a lot of light, but it was enough for him to see that this tent seemed to be being used for storage. He could see their third tent and its poles, the carpets that went with it, a neat line of saddles waiting for morning. The saddles belonging to the slain Nalzindar had been one of the things used to burn their bodies, because the saddletrees were wood, but all the rest were here. He counted. Eleven. Take away three for him, Harrier, and Bisochim, and that left . . . eight. It was true there hadn't been a lot of Nalzindar when he and Harrier had first gotten to Abi'Abadshar, but there'd been

more than eight. And soon there'd be fewer, because he might disagree with a lot of Harrier's decisions today, but he couldn't dispute what he'd said. Ahairan was going to keep on killing them.

Tiercel sat down on the carpeted floor and rested his forehead on his knees. "I'm supposed to be the one who knows what we're supposed to do. And I don't."

Maybe Harrier thought he did, but Tiercel didn't like any of the things Harrier had thought of, and the last person who'd thought he knew what he was doing had been Bisochim, and because he had, he'd called up Ahairan. If Harrier had fallen to the Dark without anybody noticing, Tiercel wouldn't be able to sense it. The High Magick didn't work that way. And while it was true that the Wild Magic could sense Taint, Bisochim couldn't sense *Sandwalkers*. For all Tiercel knew, there might be enough difference between a Wildmage and a Knight-Mage that Bisochim would put down anything he sensed in Harrier to that and not to something worse.

After a moment Tiercel sighed, and rolled to his feet to get his sleeping-mat and a blanket. If Harrier were actually Tainted, they'd probably already be bowing to Ahairan right now. In the morning he'd talk to Saravasse. Maybe she'd have some ideas.

He'd just laid everything out where he wanted it—there was plenty of room in here tonight for a change—and stripped down to his undertunic, when there was a flare of light at the doorway. A ball of Coldfire floated in and Harrier followed it.

"Put that out, will you?" Tiercel snapped. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Harrier gestured and the light vanished. He walked over to the center-pole and hung up a waterskin, then went to get his own sleeping-mat and lay it out.

"I don't want to fight with you," Harrier said, standing with his back to Tiercel as he unbuckled his swordbelts, "but if we have to, let's do it now and not tomorrow while we're riding." He took a moment to fold the straps neatly, then laid both weapons beside his mat.

I don't see what we've got to fight about now that you're getting everything your own way. Tiercel opened his mouth to say that, but what came out was: "If you fell to the Dark, you'd tell me, wouldn't you, Har?"

Harrier turned around, and for once Tiercel saw his friend too stunned to be angry. "I . . . What?" Harrier finally said. "No," he added quickly. "I don't want to hear it again. Do you—Do you have any . . . I could walk right out of this tent—*now*—and in less than five minutes I could not only *Summon* Ahairan here, I could guarantee she'd give me whatever I wanted! My life! *Your* life! My family—she'd probably agree to leave Armethalieh *completely alone* and just take the rest of the world! Five minutes, Tyr! All I have to do is cast a Healing Spell on Saravasse—and oh, hey, if that takes too long, I bet just casting *Coldfire* on her would do as well! And you're asking me if I'm Dark-Tainted? When tonight you told me you're still having *visions* about her? You've been having them all the way across the Barahileth, and every time I asked you about them you said they were just dreams, just nightmares, nothing like your visions of the Lake of Fire. Well, now that you've changed your mind, why don't you tell me just what she's been telling *you* for the last few moonturns? Because I think that if anybody's going to come clean about being Dark-Tainted, you might be the one who should start."

If Harrier had started out stunned, by the time he'd finished talking, he was as furious as Tiercel had ever seen him. Tiercel stared at him in shock, part of him wanting to recoil from Harrier's fury, part of him wanting to rage right back at him for the first time in his life. If the rest of the camp hadn't known about any of this before, it certainly did now. "She . . . I . . . She . . ." He took a deep breath. Anger won. "Who do you think you are, Harrier Gillain? Who do you think *I* am? Do you think I'd serve someone who did what Ahairan's done? Ahairan killed Simera—or have you forgotten her? She killed Ancaladar—don't tell me he's alive! If he were, he would have come back! She killed Macenor Telchi. She *made me kill people*. If you think I lied to you: fine! But I thought they were nightmares—until I saw the Shamblers, I thought they were nightmares. I don't even remember most of them. I don't know why I remembered tonight. And I know you arranged things the way you did because Sathan and Phulda and Calazir were inconvenient and you couldn't wait to get rid of them. And everybody who trusted them gets to pay the price for your *convenience*."

"I gave them a choice. I told you why," Harrier said. He was staring down at the carpet, his hands clenched into fists.

"Because your *magic* won't work? You don't do any magic *now*!" Tiercel shouted.

"I don't do magic—I *am* magic!" Harrier shouted back. "All the time! Every day! Every night! Seeing how things have to go. Seeing how I can push them that way if I do the right things. Seeing things nobody else sees. I can't see far enough. I'm afraid to see farther. The Wild Magic isn't books and recipes and little rhymes and drawing pictures in the sand and *do-this-get-that* like the High Magick is! I didn't *want* it! I didn't want to be a Wildmage, I didn't want to be a Knight-Mage. I did it . . ." There was a long pause, and when Harrier spoke again, the last of his anger had drained from his voice, leaving nothing behind but weariness. "I did it because you were going to face a Demon and you'd need help."

"Oh." Suddenly Tiercel had the strange jarring feeling that he was awake—*really* awake—for the first time in sennights. As if the whole grinding exhaustion of the journey—heat and hunger and fear and uncertainty—was a kind of blindfold that had just been removed, along with his inability to see that his dreams weren't dreams at all. "The Barantar. They're dying. The others will too," he said, and this time, the words weren't an accusation. They were a plea to something—anything—to change that. And he knew that nothing could.

"I know," Harrier said miserably. "I could have kept them with us. I could have lied to them, or scared them until they couldn't think, or just not let them loose from their promise, because I knew what they should do and I wanted my own way. And—then—I really *wouldn't* be different from Ahairan. I'd keep wanting my own way, and doing everything I could to get it. That's how it happens, Tyr. Going to the Dark. Just so you know."

Tiercel wanted to ask how Harrier knew, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear. He remembered the things Bisochim had told him as the two of them had crossed the desert with Saravasse, but those things hadn't been quite like this. And he didn't think Harrier had ever had those sorts of conversations with Bisochim.

"I suppose I should tell you everything I know about Ahairan?" Tiercel said tentatively.

Harrier sat down on his sleeping-mat and began pulling off his boots. "If you want to share that kind of stuff with me," he said. "Might drive me to the Dark." And if it was only half a joke, but at least it was that much of one.



IT was hard to do. Most of it was things Tiercel didn't know he knew until Harrier asked him—and then the information was there, in his mind, as clear and sharp as if he'd been *told*. Not images, and not memories, but certainties.

Were the Barantar dead? Not yet—except for Sathan—but they'd been captured. The Binrazan and the Thanduli were still free. The Thanduli were still at the last campsite. The Binrazan had already headed eastward.

"Why didn't she just kill them all?" Harrier asked.

"She wants—She wants—I don't know! *I don't know!*" It wasn't true. Tiercel *did* know. He could feel the shape of the knowledge inside his mind. He just couldn't imagine any way to make it into words. "She wants . . . a thing," Tiercel said more quietly. "I can't describe it. Something. Something she wants. Har, you have to . . . I'm still linked to her, I know I am!"

"When you figure out how to cast a Healing Spell so Saravasse can fly again, I'll think about killing you, not before," Harrier said bluntly. "You might be linked to Ahairan and you might not be. What you aren't, is Tainted. As for linked, if you are, that's the first luck we've had."

"You've been out in the sun much too long," Tiercel said slowly, and Harrier grinned at him wolfishly.

“Think about it. She already knows where we are, so a link doesn’t do her any good. But a link would tell us what she’s doing. Maybe that will help.”

“You mean I’m some use after all?” Tiercel said. He hadn’t meant to blurt that out—hearing him feeling sorry for himself was the last thing Harrier needed right now. But he was tired, and the few hours of sleep he’d managed to snatch in the past two days had been filled with a Demon’s thoughts, and his every waking moment had been filled with death, Shamblers, and his own whipsawed emotions.

“You’re the Anointed Champion of the Light,” Harrier said with utter seriousness. “Never think you’re useless, Tyr. Never.”

Light deliver us, he really believes that, Tiercel thought in shock. *Maybe he’s crazy after all.*

But the gravity of the moment was shattered by Harrier’s next words. “Besides, you keep Liapha from hitting me too often. She likes you. Now come on. Let’s get some sleep.”



HARRIER drove the Isvaieni hard in the next ten days in every possible way. Keeping them on the move farther into the night and the day. Insisting on guards and patrols and sentries—not only over the night camp, but at the midday camp and while the caravan was on the move.

He’d searched every tent and confiscated everything that even vaguely resembled food—even the stores of *rekhattan*. Some things—like the *rekhattan*—he’d returned to those who used it, though he’d done so in plain sight and given people a chance to object. Some things—like salt and spices—he’d divided up evenly, no matter who they’d originally belonged to. Some things that were luxuries in quantities too small to share fairly—the last of the *kaffeyah*, a few jugs of date wine, some sugared dried fruit—he’d sealed up in a large chest so that no one could have what everyone couldn’t have. Anyone might ask to inspect it to see that its contents were still there. And some things—like anything that might possibly be induced to grow at Saphthiruk—were in a chest that Bisochim had sealed with a spell, not to be opened until they arrived at the oasis: the list of people Harrier didn’t trust was very long.

It was Karuffhad who suggested that if they poured water upon the ground to soften it, the roots of the grasses and bushes that Bisochim caused to sprout could be dug up whole and carried with them to their next stop and replanted, assuring their steadily-dwindling herds of lush grazing no matter what. It was a profligate use of water—both in moistening the ground to dig up the roots at one stop, and in moistening it at the next so the roots could be planted again in holes made with a tent-peg. But it was better than seeing their only source of food starve.

They were attacked four more times during those ten days by Shamblers—twice in night camp, once at a midday halt, and once while they were on the march.

The first attack was at night, and it taught them that the Shamblers could pass through any spell-shield Bisochim cast as if it weren’t there. The second attack was at a midday camp, and it taught them that their sentries were useless against the creatures: the Shamblers simply appeared out of nowhere a few hundred yards away as if they’d sprouted from the ground. They nearly despaired until Tiercel, from his own experience in casting spells designed to mislead the eye, suggested that Ahairan was bespelling the Shamblers, or the sentries, or both. After that, Bisochim simply called a Sandwind to scrub the desert for miles around them—whether they saw anything or not—as they made camp. Unfortunately, there was a limit to the area a Sandwind could cover without becoming so large a storm that it would destroy them as well, and Ahairan had many thousands of Shamblers available to her. That was the reason for the success of the third Shambler attack—the second at a night camp—which succeeded by the simple stratagem on Ahairan’s part of sending *two* groups of Shamblers against them, the attacks timed to come several hours apart. Harrier wondered if Ahairan had noticed that they’d come up with a reasonably effective way of getting rid of her creatures. If she had, would she react the way a person would and try something else? Or would she just keep throwing Shamblers at them because an Elemental Spirit of Darkness didn’t think like anything Harrier could imagine?

The fourth attack was when they were on the march, and it taught them that the best defense was simply to run away. If they were attacked while they were camped, they had little choice but to stand and fight, but otherwise, Harrier saw no reason to do anything but run. When Shamblers had come at them from the north and the east, Harrier, Tiercel, and Bisochim had been able to burn the desiccated bodies while the caravan fled. But there’d been thousands of the Shamblers, and the caravan had lost half a day’s travel time to that feint of Ahairan’s.

Perhaps the worst thing of all about their new enemy was that the Isvaieni could no longer leave their dead any dignity. At the very least, they must dismember the bodies of their dead as completely as possible, so that Ahairan could not use them.

If they’d only faced Shamblers, the journey and their battles would have been bad enough: no one had missed the fact that leading the long-dead against them were the fresh bodies of those who had left the party when Harrier had offered them the choice. But there were still Sandwalkers—which preferred *shotors* to their riders, but would not hesitate to devour both—and the *atish’ban-jarrari*, which were aggressive, hard to spot, and lethal. In that same ten days they fought off Sandwalkers twice, using spears made from the poles of tents they no longer needed. Four people died fighting Sandwalkers. Eighteen died of *jarrari* stings. But in the last ten days they had lost almost two hundred to the Shamblers.



EARLY in the first sennight after he had left the three tribes behind, Harrier had started the practice of gathering all the surviving leaders—*Ummarai*, *chaharums*, and, in practice, anybody who wanted to stand nearby and listen, since the end-of-the-day meetings were conducted in a tent opened to the night air—to talk about what had happened that day and about what might happen tomorrow. It was a time to air concerns and disagreements before they turned into murderous arguments, to speak of small problems—lame goats, irritable *shotors*—in hopes someone might have a solution, and simply to speak to someone who wasn’t someone you were spending every minute of your day and night riding and sleeping beside. Saddest of all, it was a time to add up the deaths of the previous day. Most of Ahairan’s attacks still came at night, but it often wasn’t until the following evening—after a day spent getting away from the scene of the attack—that an accurate count of the dead could be reckoned up. With all these good reasons to be present at the evening meetings, Tiercel had been surprised at how quickly people had made excuses to leave Harrier’s discussion early, or even not to come at all. Karuffhad still insisted she was not the *Ummara* of the Adanate. Bakhudun said that any word of Harrier’s was a good word to the Hinturi. *Ummara* Kinaraf said that the Laghamba “cared not to meddle in the affairs of Wildmages.” Even after all the deaths, there were still nearly two dozen *Ummarai*—and so at least that many *chaharums*—and practically all of them had some good reason not to bother to attend.

Tiercel had been sure that would upset Harrier—make him yell, and demand that everybody attend and take responsibility for their own survival. Harrier had just shrugged and gone on talking to whoever showed up in the evening as if they were the whole conclave of *Ummarai*. When he noticed that, Tiercel noticed something else, too. Harrier never started out by telling people his own plans. He started out by stating the problem, then said: “*Tell me what you would do.*” Sometimes everyone in the tent would agree. Sometimes they argued with each other. Sometimes Harrier would agree with someone—or everyone, if they all agreed with each other. Sometimes not. But Tiercel had the uncomfortable feeling that Harrier only asked the question so he could hear what the Wild Magic was going to say. He remembered the sound of Harrier’s voice the night he’d cried: “*I am magic!*” There’d been anger there—and despair. If all of Harrier’s year-mates had gotten together to choose the boy least likely to become a Wildmage—or, in fact, become *anything* requiring deep thought—it would probably have been Harrier Gillain.

Harrier should have been the High Mage. He likes things he can understand—charts and tables and graphs. He would have liked the High Magick, Tiercel thought sadly. But the High Magick led directly to needing a source for spell energy, and . . . Harrier spending the rest of his life (short though it would have been) bound to another living creature as tightly as Dragon and Mage were bound in the Dragonbond? No. Just . . . no. Harrier valued his freedom more than he valued

anything else. That was one of the reasons the Wild Magic was driving him crazy.

At least some of the *Ummarai* came to the meetings unfailingly. Liapha and Ogmazad and Fannas and Omuta were there every evening—and Shaiara and Ciniran both attended, of course. And Zanattar came—though not Kataduk—but after the first day or two it was usually just the nine of them—eleven if Bisochim and Saravasse attended. Some nights Saravasse came and Bisochim didn't. Everybody thought that was strange except Harrier and Tiercel.



“WHAT I *still* can't figure out is why Ahairan doesn't just, you know, *kill us all* and then go off and hide for a century or two,” Harrier said crossly. The evening's gathering had begun.

“I've been thinking about that,” Tiercel said. He supposed it wasn't a real question—he didn't think Harrier actually *wanted* Ahairan to kill them all and hide—but it was something that had puzzled him for a while. If she did what Harrier had suggested, she'd *win*. So why wasn't she doing it? “I think I know. At least, I have a theory.”

“About why she's being *stupid*?” Harrier demanded. He sounded so irritated that Tiercel simply grinned at him.

“Sure. Because she is.” Everyone in the tent stared at him then, with varying expressions of disbelief.

“But . . . the Endarkened are filled with evil intelligence,” Ciniran said slowly. “*The Book of the Light* says so.”

“Yes,” Tiercel answered, nodding. “But Ahairan isn't Endarkened. And she's . . . new. *The Book of the Light* tells us that the Endarkened were immortal. They could be killed, but if they weren't killed, they lived forever. And Ahairan isn't an Endarkened. She's Dark, but not Endarkened. She's something else—something that can make things that could—eventually—become more like the Endarkened *The Book of the Light* speaks about. And what I think is that Demons are powerful—we all know that—but not necessarily smart. After they live for a few thousand years, they have a lot of experience, so they *seem* smart. But Ahairan hasn't lived for a few thousand years. Not in a body, anyway.”

“She's making mistakes,” Harrier said slowly, after he'd thought about what Tiercel had said.

“I think so,” Tiercel said. “I hope so.”

The rest of the meeting was a discussion of whether—and if so, *when*—to slaughter some of their spare *shotors* for meat. With their additional losses—and the constant ruthless winnowing of things they did not need to carry with them—the Isvaieni were now leading more than three hundred *shotors* that were under neither pack nor saddle. At the moment that was to their advantage—those fresher animals were used by the night and midday patrols—but there was also the question of whether it would be more efficient to let Saravasse feed on the *shotors*, or continue to feed her on sheep and goats.

“It would take fewer animals to stuff that belly if we stuffed it with *shotors*,” Liapha said musingly.

“A *shotor* can go without water longer—much longer—than a goat or a sheep,” Zanattar answered.

“Yeah, you'd know,” Harrier said, though without any particular heat. “My best guess is that right now we're something like a fortnight away from Saptthiruk Oasis. We can decide then, because we'll be spending several days there.”

The others nodded, taking Harrier's decision without argument. Everyone knew about Harrier's hopes of replenishing their supplies at Saptthiruk by making anything grow there that possibly could. They were holding back a number of precious supplies—not only grain, but whole dried fruits—in hopes of turning Saptthiruk not only into a garden, but a garden warded with the strongest spells Bisochim could cast.

Tiercel knew he shouldn't be thinking about stopping. All he should be thinking about was getting to Armethalich. But it had been more than two moonturns since he'd arrived at Telinchechitl to discover he was *too late*, and ever since, he'd been traveling through the desert at a breakneck pace—little food, less sleep, and constant fighting. And now, he'd finally become *aware* of something that had been true all along—that his link to Ahairan hadn't ended when she'd gotten free. Now that he knew, he hated the thought of sleeping. Which dreams were his, and which were thoughts stolen from a Demon's mind? He'd spent several days quietly, despairingly, angry at Harrier for Harrier's continuing unshakable trust in his un Taintedness, and then he'd simply . . . stopped. Harrier had two choices. He could believe that Tiercel's dreams of Ahairan's mind were nothing different than his visions had been all along . . . or he could believe that they meant that Tiercel was Tainted, and either kill Tiercel himself or ask someone to do it for him. And Tiercel knew that Harrier had never flinched away from doing something he didn't want to do if it was something he thought he had to do. He'd accepted the Three Books because he thought he had to, hadn't he?

And Tiercel knew that Knight-Mages were supposed to be, well . . . *Knights*. Warriors. Soldiers, like in the Time of Kellen. And he remembered standing in the ditch outside of Tarnatha'Iteru, watching Harrier try to wash the blood of the men he'd killed out of his clothes and off his skin, and Tiercel knew that being a warrior was the last thing in the world Harrier wanted to be. So he thought back to the sennight he'd spent sleeping in the Temple of the Light back in Sentarshadeen, and he recited *The “Litany of the Light”* to himself morning and night, and he did his best to believe that any glimpses he had of Ahairan's thoughts meant nothing more than his visions ever had.

Once they'd finished taking roast *shotor* off the menu for the next fortnight or so, Tiercel was sure they were done. Today had been a good day—so far. Nobody was dead, and when that was the case, these evening meetings were usually brief. There wasn't a lot of strategy involved when your entire plan involved running away as fast as possible from an enemy who could actually kill you any time she wanted to. Then Zanattar cleared his throat. “I would speak, Harrier.”

“Yeah, go ahead, what,” Harrier said. He sounded bored and distracted—Tiercel thought that Harrier was probably actually so tired he no longer even noticed his own exhaustion. They all were. He thought of all the Flowering Fair plays he'd been to: *The Temptation of Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy at the Hands of Anigrel the Black* by The Mock Perulan was a Rolfort family favorite, and went on for stanza after stanza about all the temptations Anigrel offered Kellen to turn to the Dark.

Came to Kellen, Kellen's brother

Dark false sibling, Serpent's shadow

Nursed upon Endarkened ichor

Anigrel the Black came seeking

Wooing his Enchanted twin whose hands the Sword of Light must

grasp—

Then did the Endarkened offer Every prize that Kellen cherished

Father's love and mother's honor

Happiness and jeweled crown

Meant to turn the Doom of Serpents from the path his feet must seek—

Tiercel was pretty sure by now that all it probably would have really taken was half-a-dozen moonturns of forced retreat across the Isvai without a supply train to

make Kellen consider Anigrel's offer really seriously, and Anigrel wouldn't even have had to throw in the silver armor or the golden saddle or the white warhorse—just a square meal and a sennight of uninterrupted sleep. It would have been utterly unbearable if the children were still with them—the *young* children, Tiercel corrected himself. They'd all thought they wouldn't be facing anything worse in the Isvai than Ahairan's attacks, when they were back in the Barahleth. It would have been utterly intolerable for the Isvaieni to be fighting Ahairan while watching their children starve before their eyes.

"When we have reached Saphthruk, it is in my mind to go among the ranks of those Young Hunters who yet remain among us, to see which of them possess a bold heart," Zanattar said. "One rider—two at most—with spare *shotors* led behind them to carry water and shelter from the sun . . . such might travel north more swiftly than the Isvaieni in their multitude."

"And do you have *any* reason to think they wouldn't be Shambler-bait the moment they were out of our sight?" Harrier snapped irritably.

"Were there an auspicious Foretelling to say it was so. And if spells could be set about them to hide them from the Demon's sight," Zanattar said mildly.

Harrier glanced toward him, and Tiercel knew that he hoped for answers Tiercel simply didn't have. He shrugged unhappily.

Harrier sighed, shaking his head. "If spells could be 'set about' *us* to hide us from the Demon's sight, a lot more of us would still be alive, Zanattar. We're not at Saphthruk yet. Maybe."



"WHAT do you really think?" Tiercel asked Harrier a few minutes later. The evening's formal discussion was over, but no matter how few hours there were to sleep in, neither of them was quite ready for bed. Tiercel, because he hated sleeping at all now. Harrier because . . . well, riding all day left you worn out and with cramped and aching muscles both. And if Tiercel had to guess, he'd be guessing that Harrier was trying to tire himself out enough to actually sleep. If Harrier had worried about things before he'd taken express responsibility for the surviving Isvaieni, it was probably nothing to what he was doing now. At least—between the night patrols and the Sandwinds—they had a little almost-safe area just beyond the outer ring of the tents where they could walk, if they wanted to. Harrier usually did.

"I don't know," Harrier answered. "What's Ahairan thinking these days?"

Tiercel should have expected the question. Part of him had been expecting it ever since Harrier had called his link to Ahairan "lucky." He'd known from that moment that Harrier could only see the link in terms of something he could use. And it was true that they needed any possible advantage they could get. Any warning of an attack, any knowledge of where Sandwalkers or *atish'ban-jarrari* were, or what direction the next army of Shamblers were coming from—and when—would be more than just an advantage. It could save lives. Despite all that, Harrier's quick response—turning his own question back at him with the casual demand for information that Tiercel had been dreading—infuriated him. Harrier didn't seem to notice, or care, that now—when Tiercel was straining to listen for Ahairan's mind—he was doing what he'd spent moonturns doing when he was trying to sense Ancaladar's. It was as if Ahairan had killed Ancaladar all over again, and nobody knew it but him. Worse: that she'd somehow taken Ancaladar's place in their Bond, and all Harrier cared about was making that connection stronger.

"Why ask me?" Tiercel snapped.

"I could ask Bisochim, but he isn't the one who told me the Barantar rode south a sennight and a half ago," Harrier responded instantly, and Tiercel could tell by the way Harrier was shaking his head that he was trying to hold on to his temper. He was tired. They were all tired—and that was so much of the problem, because when you were this tired, you made mistakes, and they couldn't afford to. "And I'm not even blaming you—I really don't, Tyr—for saying we should ride back and save them, because you'd have said that whether there was an Ahairan or not. But there *is* an Ahairan. You've been having visions about her for more than a year. You didn't stop just because she stopped being where she was and came here. I need to know."

"High Mages don't," Tiercel said. "Have visions." He'd done a lot of reading when they reached Karahelanderialigor and he'd had all the books Jermayan had collected on the High Magick to consult. Dreams, visions, prophecy, foretelling, scrying . . . there was none of that in the spells of the High Magick. The closest thing he'd ever found were spells for Seeing At A Distance. Did any of that really matter? Or did he just want to keep arguing with Harrier in the hope that Harrier would say he didn't have to dig inside his mind for whatever Ahairan might have left there?

"I don't care," Harrier said simply. "I don't care if you think you're a High Mage or the High Magistrate. You have visions."

Don't make me do this, Tiercel thought miserably into the silence that followed. He clenched his teeth to keep from saying the words aloud, and winced when sand squeaked between them. There was always sand here in the Isvai, especially now that they had a Sandwind every evening. What would he do if he *did* say them, and Harrier ordered him—or worse, if Harrier simply begged? He didn't think he could stand either one. "I hate this," he said quietly. "All of it."

"Most of it," Harrier answered, and Tiercel glanced at him in surprise. "If you hate all of it, you hate Simera, and seeing the caves of Imrathalion, and seeing Karahelanderialigor and the Elves," Harrier said.

"And Ancaladar," Tiercel whispered. The pain of losing Ancaladar never got any less, but having known him . . . that part would always have been joy.

Harrier nodded slowly. "Kareta said he isn't dead," he said quietly. "It makes no difference to you now, and it won't make any difference to him once you die. I'm sorry. But if you know anything that will help, we need to know."

Tiercel sighed, and turned around in a circle, staring up at the sky. He pulled his cloak tighter around himself, absently feeling how the ever-present dust had worked its way into the weave of even the tough boiled wool. The Nalzindar weren't weavers—his original cloak had been the one he'd salvaged from a tent at Tarnatha'Iteru, so it had belonged to some Lanzanur. He couldn't quite remember where he'd lost it—he thought he'd still had it when they'd all arrived at Telinchechit—but the one he was wearing now had been part of the store of goods given to Shaiara by Liapha. Neither the Lanzanur nor the Kadyastar were cloth-weavers, though, and the Binrazan had woven rugs, not cloth. He was trying to remember which of the tribes was primarily known for its clothmaking—was it the Aduzza? the Muranasi?—when he realized he was just stalling to keep from answering.

"I wish I could say," he said at last. "She's north of us right now. I think. She moves around a lot." And now that he knew about the link, Tiercel was paying closer attention to it, but it wasn't even like listening to someone talk in a language he didn't know. It was more like listening to a rock think. Or a tree. Or fire. Assuming rocks or trees or fire wanted you *dead*.

"But she never leaves the desert. I wonder why?" Harrier said.

Tiercel just groaned, even though he knew that Harrier wasn't asking *him*. It was a question it would be nice to have an answer to anyway: no matter how inhuman and inexperienced Ahairan was, Bisochim had told her a lot of things before he'd realized her true nature. She had to know there were more Wildmages than just the two here in the desert. And Saravasse had said that *he* could be useful to Ahairan as well—so presumably anybody born with the ancient MageGift, whether or not it was trained, was someone Ahairan could *also* use to help her spawn a new race of Demons.

She could kill them all and hide—and she wasn't.

She could go find someone else to use to begin populating the world with Demons *right now*—and she wasn't.

"Har," Tiercel said, "Do you suppose there are *two* Demons here and we just don't know it?"

"Do I want to know why you're asking me that?" Harrier asked after a long pause.

"It would explain why Ahairan is acting so funny."

"I thought you said it's because she's *stupid*," Harrier said.

"Do you think that's a good enough reason?" Tiercel asked.

"Oh—Eternal Light that strengthened the Blessed Saint Idalia in her quest to free the world from the yoke of Darkness *and* Sand and Star deliver me—let me count the reasons why I think so. One: you said so. Two: no, I think 'one' pretty much covers it. But to go back to your *previous* question—which was *stupid*, by the way—Bisochim summoned her. Bisochim hasn't mentioned a second Demon. I think he would have noticed."

"What if he didn't?" Tiercel insisted.

"Then there's nothing we can do about it anyway, so I'm not going to worry about it. Whoever kills Ahairan can kill this other Demon too. Problem solved."

Tiercel was startled into a snort of almost-laughter at the sheer ridiculousness of Harrier's casual assumption that somebody who could kill *one* Demon might as well kill *two* while they were at it. He quickly sobered again, remembering the question he'd started to ask at the beginning of their conversation. "Are you going to let Zanattar send someone north when we reach Saphthruk?"

"Maybe," Harrier said absently, his mind already elsewhere. "Maybe several someones. I'm sure he can get more than one set of volunteers."

"Don't do it," Tiercel said quietly. "It won't work. You know it won't work. Even if it *could* work—how can anyone possibly make it even as far as Akazidas'Iteru with only what they can carry? You know you said it was probably at least two moonturns, even three, in a straight line to get there. You know Bisochim said he'd probably destroyed all the other wells and oases in the Isvai and even if he didn't they can't find them anyway. You know that a *shotor* has to drink at least twice a moonturn—and if it drinks that rarely, it drinks more than fifty gallons at a time. You know they'll never—"

"Stop telling me what I know," Harrier said brusquely. "I know it."

"I know," Tiercel said. "But . . . look. I've been thinking. I didn't want to bring it up in front of everybody—and I'd need to talk to Saravasse probably to work out the details and see if it was something she was all right with before I asked him about it—but . . . couldn't Bisochim do some kind of spell to reach another Wildmage directly? He cast a spell all the way to Sentarshadeen before, and there were some spells like that in First Magistrate Cilamen's books—to Speak over a distance as well as to See over a distance. I know he can't reach the Veiled Lands directly, because of Pelashia's Veil—but he could do *something* to—"

"Keep your voice down," Harrier said urgently, his own voice suddenly dropping to a bare murmur.

Tiercel broke off and stared at him, blinking in confusion. Harrier took his arm and led him as far away from the tents as would still be safe—and wouldn't arouse curiosity.

"Yes," Harrier said, his voice still so quiet Tiercel had to lean in close to hear him at all. "Bisochim probably could do some kind of spell designed to get a message to somebody in the north. He spent most of a year trying to kill us from Telinchechitl, and it wasn't all by summoning up whatever he summoned up and sending *it* to kill us. And if he tries, I'm guessing that Ahairan will not only notice, but stop it."

"She might stop what we're doing at any time anyway," Tiercel pointed out. "And she might *not* notice—or stop it. Sending a message isn't any different than going to Armethalieh ourselves. It's just faster, Har. Maybe even *better*. He could warn every single Wildmage in the north at the same time."

"Maybe he could. That would be good. I'm sure there are some. We don't know how many. Say there are a thousand. Say ten percent get the message in some way they understand. That's a hundred. Say ten percent of *them* aren't paying MagePrices that keep them from going to Vairindiel Elvenqueen with the message immediately. That's ten. And say that ten percent of *them* aren't killed on the journey by Ahairan's creatures. That's—"

"One. Yes. I'm *still* better at Maths than you are. But we only need one person to get the message through to Queen Vairindiel," Tiercel said.

"Really?" Harrier answered. "How do we know it was received in full and understood completely? But—all right—say it was. It still takes that single Wildmage anywhere from one to six Moonturns to get to the Veiled Lands—even if you assume that all they need to do is get to the Caves of Imrathalion and use the MageDoor there. Meanwhile, say that Ahairan also knows it was sent."

"All right," Tiercel agreed cautiously.

"Bisochim sending that message—trying, *succeeding*—will probably make Ahairan take him seriously enough that she comes here and takes him and Saravasse prisoner. Then she'll kill the rest of us."

"No," Tiercel blurted out before he could stop himself. "She wants you and me alive too." He stared at Harrier, his mind filled with a collection of conflicting shocks. Realizing that he—*still*—knew more about Ahairan and her plans than he suspected. Realizing that Harrier had thought of this idea already—maybe sennights ago—and had ruled it out so completely he hadn't even discussed it with anyone. Realizing that . . .

"You don't think we're getting out of . . . You . . . You've been telling everyone for moonturns that we have to warn Armethalieh, that it's so important that hundreds and hundreds of people have *died* for it. You've kept promising that we're going to—that at least some of us are going to—get there and *warn them*. But you're throwing away the best chance of actually warning them. You *lied* to everyone."

"I said to keep your voice down," Harrier hissed. "We *do* have to warn Armethalieh—or warn someone. I didn't lie to anybody," he added, shaking his head in denial. "Everything I've said has been true—you know that. What we're doing right now is still our best chance, and I have no intention of throwing it away. If Bisochim tries what you suggest—if Ahairan knows—she'll see it as an attack. If we attack her, she'll attack us. Even if the message you want him to send gets out, she has *moonturns* to make her own plans—hiding, tainting one of us, even going to Armethalieh and taking ship for the Selken Isles."

"More Knight-Mage wisdom," Tiercel said bitterly. Despite his sense of betrayal, he was keeping his voice as low as Harrier's.

"If you call it 'Knight-Mage wisdom' to play for time and hope somebody figures out what having Goblins and Kraken and all the rest of it reappearing all over the place really *means*," Harrier answered. "If you do: yes. It's our best hope: keep her here and keep her attention *on us* for as long as possible. You remember what—oh, what was his name? Innkeeper back on the War Road east of Armethalieh—said."

"At the Three Trees? Master Artylas," Tiercel supplied automatically.

"Right," Harrier said. "He said then that—fourteen, fifteen moonturns ago now?—they'd already been seeing Darkspawn incursions for half a year and more. I'm betting—hoping—that they've gotten worse since. Bad enough that somebody else is going to notice. I know that the Elves had this crackbrained idea that not telling you what was going on would let you *fix* things, Tyr. Maybe it did. Maybe you did your part when you made sure that Bisochim wouldn't go along with anything Ahairan came up with."

"I don't think that's actually what Jermayan was thinking of," Tiercel said slowly.

"Well, Elves don't have to be right all the time," Harrier said. "So stop blaming yourself for all of this."

"Say I don't," Tiercel said, turning Harrier's own argument back on him. "How does that make what you're doing now *right*?"

"All right. I don't think we'll get to Armethalieh. We could. It's not impossible. I don't even think we'll get to Akazidas'Iteru, though, if you want the real truth. But if I told everyone I didn't think we could, that we'd all die right here in the Isvai, that we didn't have a chance of warning *anybody*, what do you think would happen?" Harrier's voice was quietly, coldly angry, but the anger was turned inward, and the combination of rage and despair and panic made Tiercel feel all of them twice as sharply because he knew that Harrier couldn't let himself feel any of them. *Why did we have to grow up so fast?* he thought. He should be at University right now. Harrier should be on the docks.

“They’d panic,” Tiercel admitted reluctantly.

“And head off to do Light knows what, because why would they stay here with us when Ahairan is attacking us constantly? And then they’d die right now, immediately, just like the Binrazan and the Barantar and the Thanduli died,” Harrier finished.

There wasn’t much more to be said after that. “I’m tired,” Tiercel said. “I’m going back.” They were both right—at least partly—and whether they followed Harrier’s plan or Tiercel’s, it was almost certain that everyone was going to die either way, and “fast” or “slow” didn’t really matter a lot. What it all came down to was whether or not you believed that any spell-message Bisochim tried to send would get through.

Say it was. It still takes that single Wildmage anywhere from one to six Moonturns to get to the Veiled Lands . . . And Tiercel wasn’t completely sure which side of the argument he was on any longer.



“I’M hoping when we reach Saphthruk we’ll find out that we can fortify it enough so it can be a permanent camp.”

Tiercel had never managed to figure out how Harrier could be cheerful and alert in the mornings even *before* they’d been being hunted by a Demon. And he could understand Harrier being alert now. The cheerful—whether it was actual or just putting up a good front—was just a little disturbing. Especially when you added in the fact that Harrier apparently wanted to have intelligent conversations before the sun was up.

“Shamblers can come through spell-shields,” Tiercel said.

The morning routine was a lot brisker now that breakfast consisted of a liter or so of heavily-salted dilute broth, served cold. They’d started stewing desert grass along with it a few days ago, and the broth had a bitter greenish flavor now, but at least it was different. And without a morning fire to light and tend, the tents were struck and everyone’s possessions ready to load in little more than an hour. After the time they’d been attacked by Shamblers at dawn, half the camp stood sentry duty now—a ring of mounted Isvaieni around the perimeter—while the other half struck the tents, loaded the pack animals, and dug out the buried roots around the nightspring at the center of the camp and packed them between layers of wet sand in carrying baskets. By now it was all a familiar routine.

“Yeah, but they can’t come through *walls*,” Harrier answered, just as if he’d been thinking about this for a while. “Bisochim built walls out of sand once. He can do it again. I don’t know. We’ll see.” He and Tiercel left the folding of the tent—a complex process—to the Nalzindar and to Bisochim while the two of them took care of the simpler tasks of folding and rolling the blankets and mats and carpets for loading.

Tiercel got to his feet with an armful of mats and walked over to the waiting *shotor*. Last night Harrier had said that he expected all of them to die here in the Isvai. This morning he was talking about building a permanent fort at Saphthruk Oasis. These days so many of Harrier’s answers ended in “maybe” and “I don’t know” and “we’ll see,” and Tiercel wasn’t sure which was worse: thinking that Harrier’s assessment of the situation was right—or thinking that his plans to defend all of them were built upon a foundation of sand.

Twelve



The Quick and the Dead

GOING TO SAPTHIRUK Oasis instead of striking straight north through the spine of the Middle Desert wasn't the most direct route to Akazidas'Iteru, but everyone agreed that nothing had ever grown in most of the Middle Desert even before Ahairan, and while by now they were carrying enough salvaged plants with them that they could plant their own meadow wherever they went, if nothing had ever grown there before, there was no guarantee that even Wildmagery could make something grow there now. Harrier supposed it was a pretty good joke that he was now taking a more obsessive interest in making things grow than even Lady Rolfort. Every summer she and his Ma . . .

No.

Harrier wouldn't think about Ma, or home, or any of those things. Or if he had to, at least he'd be able to remember having once pulled Ma's flowers for Bellari and Branyar because they'd wanted them and were afraid of the thorns, and not of having teased them or refused. And Ma had howled like a boiled cat when she'd seen the damned rosebush—how was *he* supposed to know they were something special; it wasn't like he paid attention to the Dark-damned things—and then about the time Ma was getting around to saying she was going to have Da ship him off to the Selken Isles, the twins came tromping into the kitchen demanding Ma put the flowers in their hair. So he hadn't been shipped off to the Selken Isles after all.

Harrier hated thinking about a home he'd never see again. Whenever he did, what he ended up thinking about was how likely it was that it was going to be destroyed. And the worst wouldn't be if he never knew. The worst would be if he did. The worst would be if he found himself standing face-to-face with Ahairan on his family's doorstep in Grindon Road, and she said to him: *Do just one thing for me, Harrier Gillain, and I won't go inside . . .*

That was why he was willing to keep going, day after day, taking this second-best chance of victory, doing everything he could think of to keep Ahairan's attention focused on them—keeping her *here*—for as long as possible. The time Ahairan was using up wearing them down was time for Saravasse to heal (not to be able to fly again—he knew that her wing regrowing on its own would probably take years—but just to *heal* enough so that she might have the stamina—if the worst happened—to make the run north). Time for one of the Wildmages somewhere in the Nine Cities to notice what was going on. Time for one of the Elven Mages to realize Ahairan was already loose. Time for another Knight-Mage to appear, or another High Mage to be summoned by the Light. Even time for them to figure out some way to stop Ahairan themselves, although Harrier wasn't counting on that. Bisochim had tried and failed, and if a Dragonbond Mage couldn't do it . . . well, it wasn't likely that a Knight-Mage who wasn't all that good at spells in the first place and a High Mage who couldn't really cast spells at all would have any better luck.

So they were playing a game of rat-and-dog, and trying to stay out of the dog's jaws while keeping her attention. To keep Ahairan's attention, they had to stay alive—at least some of them did, Harrier corrected himself morbidly. And Tiercel was right—any volunteers Zanattar could get couldn't possibly carry enough water for a journey north. It didn't matter if the volunteers were the crazy ones that even the other Isvaieni sort of avoided—sending people off into the desert to do nothing but die would just depress everybody else. The thought made Harrier want to laugh. How could anyone be more miserable than this? The only reason he could imagine for the tribes not having simply *left* was that he'd told them what had happened to the Barantar and the Binrazan and the Thanduli, and they'd seen proof for themselves when their bodies had come after them as Shamblers.

But everyone was exhausted. Near starvation. They were all looking forward to reaching Sapthirik and just being able to *stop*, if only for a few days. Harrier hoped more than he could say that the apples they were carrying could be turned into apple trees—not to mention the *limums*, *naranjes*, and figs. They'd slaughter the last of the sheep and goats there, he thought. They'd get a decent meal out of it, and they'd travel faster without having to chase goats all over the desert. They could winnow the *shotors* too. Let Saravasse gorge herself stupid on the smelly beasts, the poor thing certainly deserved it.

Harrier suddenly realized he was thinking of Sapthirik as if none of them would be moving on from there. He didn't want to imagine what was making him think that but if they had to make their last stand against Ahairan at Sapthirik Oasis, at least they could do it from inside a damned big walled fort—and if any of the seeds they had would sprout into trees, they could make new arrows.

And if it looked as if they were going to be overrun, he'd give Shaiara his swords, let Zanattar slip a garrote around his neck, and try to Heal Saravasse by himself. Or they could go with Tiercel's plan and have Bisochim try to send a spell message to anyone who could hear it.

He wasn't willing to try that except as a last resort.

Harrier wondered just when Tiercel would realize what Harrier was thinking about these days. Harrier hadn't discussed his strategy with Tiercel, and he hadn't discussed it with Bisochim. It was bad enough for him to suspect that Bisochim was going crazy and taking Saravasse with him—it meant that not only couldn't Harrier trust Bisochim (not because he was Tainted, but because he was going mad), it meant Harrier couldn't trust Saravasse either, because they had a whole desert's worth of proof that Saravasse had to do what Bisochim wanted her to do no matter whether *she* wanted to do it or not. Harrier was sorry for Saravasse, but he couldn't work up a lot of sympathy for Bisochim—everybody knew better than to mess with Demons. But Tiercel was Harrier's friend, and Harrier *did* care about Tiercel. And he was afraid that Tiercel was going just as crazy as Bisochim was. Because of that, he couldn't trust any of Tiercel's opinions not to be colored by what Ahairan wanted, and he wasn't even really sure that Ahairan couldn't somehow collect information from Tiercel's mind without revealing her presence.

And when Tiercel figured out that was what Harrier was actually thinking . . . Harrier winced inwardly.

Of course, there was always the other possibility. If he thought that everybody was going crazy but him, that might be the only proof he needed that he was the only one actually going crazy.



LATE afternoon was the worst time of day for visibility. The sun was heading toward the horizon, it was the last gasp of heat before the plunge into the cold of night, and at the moment the convoy was actually bearing slightly west, which made conditions even worse.

"What kind of self-respecting Spirit of Shadow attacks people with *bugs* smaller than my thumbnail?" Harrier muttered crossly, pulling the top of his *chadar* further

forward in hopes it would cut more of the sun-glare.

Midday camp had been disrupted by an attack of *atish'ban-barghusi*—swarms of little black hopping biting vermin coming out of nowhere—the same ones they'd all hated so much in the Barahileth and not gotten to like any better since. Bisochim had swept the camp with magic to kill them, Tiercel had spent hours puking from having a Wild Magic spell cast directly *on* him, and everyone else had spent almost as long trying to find all the little dead bodies before they rotted.

"The same one that's been doing it for the last three moonturns," Tiercel snapped. "Get used to it."

"Oh, I—" Harrier began.

"Someone comes!" Saravasse announced. "From the north!"

Shotor saddles didn't have stirrups you could stand in, but by now Harrier had developed both the habit and the knack of kneeling on his saddle to gain a moment's extra height to inspect something in the distance. The instant he signaled his *shotor* to stop, Shaiara sounded her signal whistle, and Harrier heard the shrill ululation of bone signal whistles traveling back all the way up the caravan.

Worst possible time of day, Harrier thought absently, watching the figures in the distance shimmer and dance through the veil of heat-haze. For a moment, the view became clearer, and Harrier blinked in surprise. *Now that's impressive*, he said to himself. *There must be about nine or ten thousand Shamblers there*. Of course the Shamblers moved at a slow walk—or *shamble*—nobody had ever seen one run—and they were still a couple of miles away, so the caravan was pretty safe. Harrier always wondered how Ahairan moved them around, though. They had to walk everywhere, didn't they? "Does she think we're crazy?" he demanded of nobody in particular. "She thinks—what? That I've decided that what I want to do with my night is fight with her enormous army of dead people in the middle of nowhere? No! That's it. I'm done for today. I've dealt with Demon *barghusi*. That's enough. I quit! Come on—let's go somewhere else. Saravasse, Bisochim—if you'd please erase this army of Demonic Shamblers from the face of the Isvai, that'd be great."

Tiercel actually snickered. Bisochim stared at him as if Harrier had just done something so utterly *extraordinary* that Bisochim couldn't imagine how to respond to it. Shaiara had her "ignoring" face on, and simply blew the series of whistles that meant they were all going back the other way. By now, the Isvaieni had actually gotten more practice than they wanted to have at that: while the column couldn't exactly turn in place, it could come pretty close. They'd backtrack for an hour or so, then turn west again as soon as Bisochim's Sandwind dropped, so as to not lose too much ground.

"I quit!" Harrier shouted in the direction of the advancing Shamblers. "Shift's done! Going home! Not leading any more armies today! You might as well give up! Come back to—"

"Harrier," Saravasse said, interrupting his rant.

Harrier slid back down onto his saddle with a thump. "What?"

"Those Shamblers. They're *all* fresh dead."

"*All* of them?" Tiercel demanded, sounding horrified. "How many of them are there?"

"About ten thousand," Harrier answered, his voice flat. Even if there'd been more than one thousand eighty-nine people in the Barantar, Binrazan, and Thanduli tribes put together, they'd already accounted for at least two-thirds of them in the last fortnight. Without thinking twice, he tapped his *shotor* on the shoulder, urging it forward.

"Wait! What—Where are you *going*?" Tiercel shouted after him.

"To see what they're wearing!" Harrier shouted back.

He had no intention of getting close enough to the Shambler horde to get into trouble. All the Shamblers did was . . . *shamble*. At least until they got within arms' reach, and then they'd attack with a sword or a spear or a knife or a chunk of wood or their bare (decaying) hands. But Harrier could think of only two places in the south where Ahairan could find ten thousand people to kill—and one of them would be any army that Chief Magistrate Vaunnel sent to quell the "Isvaieni Uprising." So he wanted to get close enough to get a good look at them. About a mile away would do.

"You are an idiot," Saravasse announced, arriving to pace him. She didn't even have to exert herself; she was walking slowly while his *shotor* trotted and she seemed to be prepared to grouse about his stupidity the whole way. Bisochim wasn't with her. He rode a *shotor* most of the time; Harrier suspected that Saravasse was simply too hot to ride bareback during the day, because even if a dragon's scales only *looked* like metal, they were still as hot as metal.

"You aren't the first person to realize that," Harrier answered.

Following along about a quarter-mile behind the two of them were Zanattar and two dozen of Zanattar's Young Hunters. It wasn't worth the trouble to turn around and shoo them back to the caravan, and Harrier doubted they'd go, anyway. He hated having to worry about Zanattar, but Zanattar was an ongoing problem. Not just for himself, but because at least a good third of the Isvaieni would follow him before they'd follow their own *Ummarai*. And a good number of *them* were what Liapha called "disordered in spirit" and Kamar called "sun-touched" and Harrier just thought were so crazy that maybe even Zanattar couldn't control them.

"What can this display of childish bravado possibly gain you?" Saravasse scoffed.

"Information," Harrier said briefly. "Unless you happen to be an authority on the uniforms of the Armethalichean Militia and the levies of the Nine Cities . . ." The leading edge of the Shambler army was in plain sight now. Harrier signaled his *shotor* to halt.

The walking dead had no more humanity or aliveness about them than stone statues might. He'd seen a lot of Shamblers by now—far too many of them the bodies of people he'd known well—and he never had the sense, even for an instant, that they were even as alive as the Goblins or the Sandwalkers. He didn't pity them, because there was nothing there to pity. But staring at the slow shuffling progress of the army of bodies across the sand, Harrier felt a raw surge of anger mixed with horror.

In the first rank of the Shamblers, the body of a young girl walked. Its long tunic had been pink, he thought, before sun and dust had turned it a dun no-color, and the sun still sparkled on the gold threads woven through the cloth of the sash that held its striped overtunic in place. Its long black hair hung loose, tangled and clotted with dust. Beside it, walking in perfect unison, was the body of a man in the short tunic and trousers Harrier had seen the shop keepers wearing in Tarnatha'Iteru. Its hands swung loosely at its sides as it walked, and the blade of the knife it carried flashed with monotonous regularity as the light hit it. Harrier's gaze skipped onward, along the long row of bodies in the first rank. The Shamblers all had a horrible sort of similarity to each other—as if Death and Demonic magic had made them all kin—but that didn't mean they were all identical now. It would, he thought, be so much less disturbing if they were. He saw the bodies of two men in ragged and unfamiliar uniforms. One had a knife stuck through its throat. Further on were the bodies of three women walking side by side. The throat of the one in the middle had been cut from ear to ear, and its clothes were covered with long-dried blood. One of the other two was wearing the short lightweight hooded cloak that everyone in the *Iteru*-cities wore instead of the *chadar*. Young, old, tall, short, men, women, children . . .

"Light deliver us," Harrier said quietly. The other place Ahairan could get her hands on this many fresh durable hard-to-burn Shamblers besides an army sent by Chief Magistrate Vaunnel was . . . Akazidas'Iteru.

And she had.

Moving mechanically, Harrier turned his *shotor* and urged it back toward the column, goading it to a fast trot. He paid no attention to Zanattar's Young Hunters when he reached them: they could get out of his way, or he could run them down. It was their choice.

The column was still in the process of getting the riderless animals and the livestock tucked safely back into the center of the column before moving. In any sane

world, they could use those animals as a buffer against attack and keep the people safe. Safer. In this one, if the animals died, so did they.

Tiercel, Shaiara, Ciniran, and Bisochim were waiting for him a few hundred yards behind the new back of the column. Harrier had a sudden intense desire to just whip up his *shotor* and keep going. Instead he brought it to a halt in front of them. “Ahairan’s turned everyone in Akazidas’Iteru into Shamblers,” he said bluntly. “I don’t think there can be anybody left alive in the city. Not from the number of bodies out there.”

If it hadn’t been the end of a bad day—although there weren’t any good ones anymore—Harrier supposed he would have at least thought about finding some way to give them this unwelcome news more gently. None of them had expected to reach Akazidas’Iteru, but it was the city at the foot of the Trade Road. Anybody coming south—unless they came by dragon—would be taking that road. If Ahairan had taken Akazidas’Iteru, she’d made it into her first trap for anybody coming south—or her last way to guarantee that someone in the south didn’t escape to the north.

Shaiara and Ciniran looked grim. Tiercel looked stunned. Bisochim . . . looked the way he usually did, as if he hadn’t quite heard what Harrier had said and was too well-mannered or timid or just too *distracted* to want to say so. There were times that Harrier thought that most of Bisochim’s energy was going into just not . . . doing something. Harrier wasn’t quite sure what it was, except that whatever it was, it would be a bad thing if Bisochim ever actually did it.

“It is not an unexpected thing,” Shaiara replied slowly. “The Creature of Shadow may be mad, but she is not so dull-witted as to let us draw near to such a great store of allies and supplies unchallenged. She knows well that in another moonturn’s travel Bisochim might have Called away their flocks and herds over the sand—aye, and perhaps the beasts would even have reached us! Now, if you have seen all that you wished to, may we depart?”

Having Bisochim Call their livestock wasn’t something Harrier had even thought of. It would certainly have gotten the Consul’s attention. He wondered if Ahairan would have considered that as much of a threat as a spell-message. They’d never know now. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m done here. Let’s go. If you wouldn’t mind summoning up that nice big Sandwind now, Bisochim?”

Bisochim nodded, and urged his *shotor* forward. Harrier had watched Bisochim Call a Sandwind often enough to know that Bisochim would be frowning in concentration now, studying the desert as if he were choosing individual grains of sand for his storm, although what he had to Summon for a Sandwind wasn’t sand, but wind. Being near the spell always made the hair on the back of Harrier’s neck prickle, though the rest of the Isvaieni said they didn’t notice anything at all. And—as long as he was at least half a mile away—neither did Tiercel.

“Going now,” Tiercel said in a stifled voice. “See you later.”

“Yeah,” Harrier said, waving him off. At least, Tiercel usually didn’t notice Bisochim’s Sandwind Callings. Being near two Wild Magic spells in one day was probably pushing it, though—Tiercel still looked drained from the spell he’d caught at midday. But none of them had any reserves left to burn.

The caravan was finally moving south, and Tiercel headed his *shotor* toward its head at a brisk trot. Shaiara and Ciniran rode after Tiercel, and Zanattar and his warriors followed them. Harrier hesitated, glancing over his shoulder, even though the wind was already starting to rise. The Shamblers were visibly closer, and while there wasn’t any possibility that they could catch the caravan even at its usual leisurely pace, there was something creepy about their relentless progress. He frowned faintly. Saravasse was still standing out there in the middle of the desert, staring toward the Shamblers. She hadn’t moved at all. He really didn’t want to know that the deployment of this Shambler host had just been part of an elaborate trick to cast an additional spell on Saravasse to trap her.

“Yeah,” Harrier repeated to himself. “Time to go. *Bisochim!* Whistle your girlfriend back, all right?”

Suddenly Saravasse’s head whipped up and she turned back toward them. “Wait!” she shouted. “*Some of them aren’t dead!*”

“How many?” Harrier demanded the moment Saravasse reached them. He refused to think about the idea that Ahairan had simply bespelled everyone in Akazidas’Iteru to start marching south while they were still alive, letting them die on the way and turn into Shamblers.

“Not many,” Saravasse said unhappily. “Less than ten. Perhaps . . . five ranks back in the army. At the center.”

“Damn, damn, damn . . . Bisochim, that Sandwind you’re Calling . . . can you just . . . hold it?” Harrier asked.

“Hold it?” The Isvaieni Wildmage stared at Harrier and then down at his hands. Harrier groaned inwardly. This was the worst possible time for Bisochim to have one of his attacks of *vagueness*.

“Hold it back for a while. There are live people being held prisoner by the Shamblers. I’m going to rescue them first. When I have . . . *then* hit them with the Sandwind.”

“Oh.” Bisochim considered this for what seemed like an eternity. “I cannot hold back the Sandwind for long.”

“It had better not take long,” Harrier answered grimly.



DESPITE what he’d said, Harrier had no intention of riding all by himself into the middle of ten thousand Shamblers to try to bring out some unknown number of people “less than ten.” He rode back along the retreating caravan until he found Zanattar. “I need sixty of your Young Hunters. I want fifty who think the idea of attacking that Shambler army would be a lot of fun, and ten with sense. I need ten extra *shotors* with saddles. And I need it all right now.”

“You know such men and women ride with us,” Zanattar said, nodding. “Harrier, you cannot—”

“Saravasse says there are people—alive—with the Shamblers. We’re going to rescue them to find out what happened to Akazidas’Iteru. I’m going along to make sure they aren’t some Tainted trap of Ahairan’s. Hurry up—Bisochim can’t hold back that Sandwind forever.”

He had what he needed inside of a chime. Zanattar came, and so did Shaiara—but both of them intended to wait with the sensible warriors and the ten extra *shotors*. It wasn’t a matter of bravery or cowardice. If Harrier died today, Zanattar and Shaiara—and Tiercel—would have to figure out what to do next.

The fifty warriors Zanattar had chosen to follow Harrier in his assault on the Shambler army were all that Harrier could have asked for, assuming he’d actually wanted to do this. The highest losses the Isvaieni suffered any time they actually had to fight were among the particular group of Young Hunters (crazy—sun-touched—disordered—take your pick) who’d followed Zanattar in his original crusade against the String of Pearls and apparently decided they liked that kind of life. It wasn’t so much that that group of Young Hunters wanted to die—they were just looking for any opportunity to kill. But going into a fight with that attitude meant that they often didn’t come out of it. As they rode toward the Shamblers, they were actually laughing and joking and happy about the chance to attack an army that outnumbered them approximately two hundred to one. Even though Harrier had told them that all they were doing was fighting their way in to the live people, dragging them out, and running, he didn’t get the feeling that many of the Young Hunters really cared. More people were probably going to die this afternoon than they were going to save—even if they saved any—which made this rescue attempt . . . even stupider. But Harrier couldn’t talk himself into believing that the Shamblers’ hostages would be just as happy dead, or excuse killing them on the grounds that it was too great a risk to rescue them, or even think about the fact that they didn’t have enough food to feed themselves right now without adding more people who’d need to be fed. If the hostages were Shadow-Touched, he’d know as soon as he reached them—it was why he was going. If they weren’t, they deserved to be rescued.

Over time, the *shotors* had become inured to the presence of the Shamblers—as much as that was possible—and the wind was still blowing mostly north, carrying the Shamblers’ scent away from the animals. What the beasts would do when they found themselves in the middle of an entire army of Shamblers was anybody’s guess, but they didn’t dare try to fight their way into the Shambler army on foot.

When they were within a bowshot of the Shambler line, Hamazan—the Young Hunter band’s unofficial leader—drew his *awardan* and gave voice to a weird ululating wail. Harrier felt a flash of reflexive dread at the sound. It was the Isvaieni army’s battle cry. He’d heard it outside the walls of Tarnatha’Iteru the night the city fell, and no matter how many times he’d heard it since, it never failed to make his hackles rise. Harrier drew his own *awardan*—the heavy southern blade would be more use against Shamblers than his Selken swords. Within heartbeats, the rest of the Young Hunters had taken up the wailing howl, and Hamazan goaded his *shotor* into a run. The things *could* gallop, but their stiff-legged pacing trot, while bone-jarring, was also about as fast as anybody usually needed to go. Not today. Today they needed speed, because they needed the impact that came with speed.

So quickly that it took only a few heartbeats, Harrier saw—*perceived*—and assessed the location of the Isvaieni caravan—still moving southward—the location of Bisochim and Saravasse—still where he’d left them, two miles away—the location of Zanattar, Shaiara, eight Isvaieni Young Hunters, and ten *shotors* awaiting riders—half a mile behind the line. All around him he could see-without-seeing the men and women he rode among—

And ahead—like a vast *wrongness*—the Shamblers.

It was as if each body had a hair-fine thread of Shadow leading away from it, a dark crack in the fabric of the world. Even now, Harrier didn’t sense Taint coming from the Shamblers—only living things could be Tainted, and the Shamblers were nothing more than bodies. But in the middle of that peculiar sea of lifelessness, there were eight figures that were more than bodies. Harrier could see where they’d been, where they were going, and—more than that—where they *intended* to go. His MageSight presented them to him in a blurred kaleidoscope of color: dizzying and useless except for the fact that now he knew where they were and how many of them there were.

And that they weren’t Tainted.

Harrier was riding just behind the first line of Young Hunters, a position he’d taken without thinking about it. It was only in the last seconds before they struck the Shambler line that his brain caught up to what his instincts had done. His Knight-Mage intuition expected the first line of Young Hunters to break the Shambler line—paving his way in to where the hostages were—and die. For an instant he felt anger—regret—a churning welter of emotions too complex to decipher—then he set them all aside. It was done.

In that instant, Hamazan and the leading edge of the Young Hunters struck the Shambler line at full speed.

It shouldn’t have been possible. No *shotor* would willingly throw itself at an obstacle if it had a chance to stop. But they were also herd animals, and between their riders’ yelling at them and flogging them, and the fact that they were running flat out, the lead animals couldn’t stop and the ones behind them couldn’t see the obstruction.

The Shamblers staggered backward, crashing into each other as the press of *shotor* bodies shoved them back and aside. Some stayed on their feet. Some fell. None of the Shamblers paid any attention to each other at all—their entire attention was fixed on the Isvaieni. Harrier felt as much as saw the ripple of intention pass through the entire mass of Shamblers, as if all the bodies shared one mind: the army ceased its mechanical forward movement to turn on them, and the rearward groups began moving out and to each side in an agonizingly slow flanking maneuver.

Fire. Harrier reached out, setting the Shamblers outside their immediate vicinity aflame. Desert-dry fabric kindled quickly, and in the close-packed ranks the flames spread quickly from one body to the next, but there was no real chance that the fresh dead would burn away to ash, and nothing short of that would stop them. As the thin blackish smoke coiled up, whipping toward the northern horizon, Harrier realized he’d done it, not for the nonexistent advantage it would give them, but to provide him with an accurate gauge of the wind. It was stronger now than it had been even a few minutes ago.

Their charge had gotten them through two ranks of Shamblers, and only speed would keep them from being encircled. The *shotors* were terrified, and only brutality kept them moving forward and outward, widening the wedge of their charge and allowing more Isvaieni to ride into the space thus opened.

“They aren’t Tainted! We have to get them out!” he shouted to the others.

The battle they were fighting was eerily silent. The Isvaieni were the only ones making noise, shouting and whooping and calling out to each other. There wasn’t even the clash of steel on steel, because the Shamblers didn’t parry any attacks. All they did was try to drag the riders on the outer edges of the wedge off their *shotors*. Hack off a head, and the body kept attacking. The only things that worked were hacking off a hand, or an arm, or knocking the Shambler off its feet. That didn’t kill or even harm it, but the others would walk right over it trying to get at them.

Harrier saw one of the Young Hunters riding ahead of him—he thought her name was Sauta—leap down from her saddle directly into a knot of Shamblers. He saw her face as she launched her attack and wished he hadn’t. She was laughing—laughing as she kicked and shoved the Shamblers—not even trying to kill them, just trying to knock down as many as she could. Her *shotor*, freed of her control, tried to flee through a gap in the milling crowd of bodies. It staggered and stumbled, and when it did, Shamblers swarmed over it like *kintibaz* over a dropped honeycake. The *shotor* screamed as it died. Sauta didn’t. Her sacrifice gained them a few more precious yards of distance.

Sauta wasn’t their first casualty, only the latest. Behind them, the Shamblers were trying to push through their line to get into the center of it. A couple of them—Harrier hoped it was only accident, and not that the things could actually *learn something*—had attacked the *shotors* instead of their riders, and the injured animals had gone down. Maybe the riders could’ve saved themselves if they’d tried—escaped to the center of the Isvaieni formation, ridden double with someone else—Harrier didn’t know. He hadn’t been there. He only knew they’d died. The worst of this was that there was no possibility the Isvaieni could kill all the Shamblers, and they couldn’t even frighten them. You might as well try to frighten a hurricane—or a Sandwind.

Abruptly the direction of the wind changed, blowing foul-smelling smoke back over the mounted Isvaieni. *Not good*, Harrier thought automatically, squinting and trying not to cough. If the wind was changing direction like this, it meant the Sandwind was coming—soon.

“Hamazan—*left!*” Even in the moment Harrier shouted the warning, it was too late. Hamazan was blinded by a gust of smoke for the critical moment that allowed a Shambler in City Guard uniform to reach him. It thrust upward with its spear into Hamazan’s stomach and used the weapon to drag him from his *shotor*’s back.

Hemmed in by Shamblers and maddened by the smell of blood, Hamazan’s *shotor* lunged forward, spitting and snapping at everything in its path, bawling in terror. With Hamazan dead there wasn’t anyone between Harrier and the Shamblers. He swung his *awardan* down mechanically—

And Hamazan’s *shotor* broke through the last rank of bodies between Harrier and the hostages.

Harrier’s *shotor*, seeing a place that wasn’t filled with monsters, bolted forward eagerly. The prisoners were being held in a large open space—at least sixty feet square—surrounded by Shamblers. Right now Harrier couldn’t tell anything about them except that they were alive. Their clothes were in rags. Where he could see skin, it was sunburnt and cracked, even bleeding. “Come on!” he shouted, as much to the people behind him as to the people ahead.

The people he’d come to rescue were lying on the ground as if they’d dropped in their tracks the moment the Shamblers had stopped moving forward—and the wind was still rising. “Damn it, come on, damn it—*move!*” Harrier shouted again. None of them did—but at least the Shamblers didn’t either. It was as if this square of space was somehow magic (of a different kind) and the creatures wouldn’t enter it. Harrier wasn’t sure he was confident enough of that to dismount and test his theory unless he absolutely had to: Hamazan’s *shotor* had run at the opposite wall of Shamblers in its panic, and knocked enough of them down to get through it before it had gotten jammed among the unmoving dead. He could hear it screaming now.

The Isvaieni Young Hunters were following him into the space. There were twenty-seven left out of the original fifty, not as bad in terms of losses as Harrier had

feared—the only trouble was, *all of them had followed him*. When the last rider came through the opening in the Shambler ranks, the bodies closed up behind her, leaving them . . . trapped in the middle of the Shambler army, with a Sandwind about to kill all of them. Harrier would figure out who to complain to about that later. If there was a later.

“All right! We need to get these people mounted, then we need to get out of here!” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the rising wind. He waited until one of the other Isvaieni—Katyani? Kandyani?—grabbed his *shotor's* lead rope, then slid down from the saddle—praying that he was right about this space being one that the Shamblers wouldn't enter for any reason—and hurried over to the nearest of the captives. When he touched her, she howled in a cracked high voice and tried to scuttle away on all fours, hiding her head in her arms. At least he'd been right about this being a safe zone—but it wouldn't be safe the moment the Sandwind hit.

“Look!” Harrier shouted. “We're here to rescue you and take you away from the Shamblers, but we have to do it fast or else we're all going to die right here! So come on! *Now!*”

He managed to haul the woman to her feet—she was filthy and hideously sunburned and covered in scabs—and handed her up to the nearest mounted Isvaieni. She didn't struggle, but she didn't shut up, either. Two of the other Young Hunters had also dismounted, and among the three of them, they handed the eight refugees up to others who were still mounted. Most of the refugees were moaning or whimpering and Harrier wanted to feel sorry for them but there just wasn't time right now.

“Riders carrying double in the middle! Everyone else, protect them! Let's go!” Harrier hauled himself into his *shotor's* saddle without even trying to get his mount to kneel, thinking irritably that this had been supposed to be the *easy* part—an open line of retreat being held for them by part of the attack wedge and nothing to do but point the *shotors* at it and let them run. It was just too bad that nobody but him had remembered that part of the plan. There was fine sand in the wind now. He pulled his *chadar* forward to cover his nose and mouth.

They'd lost twenty-three Isvaieni coming in, at least one by something close to suicide. They'd all have died trying to get out—because they were starting from a stand, because the Shamblers were doing their sluggish best to mass directly in front of them, except for one thing: on the way out, the *shotors* could see they were heading *through* the Shamblers into the open desert, and they'd do nearly anything to reach it.

Escape wasn't as easy as just riding out while the *shotors* trampled everything in their paths. But again and again, Harrier saw the Shamblers just ignore the *shotors* in order to attack the Isvaieni, as if they'd been given some overriding command to do that. Or . . . no. He'd seen them kill *shotors*. It was as if they'd been given some kind of checklist, and if there were any people available, they had to try to kill them *first*. It was what saved them.

Most of them.

The sky had begun to turn the strange polished-brass color that meant the Sandwind was about to strike. It made the twilight even darker. They lost eight more Isvaieni on their retreat. (*Thirty-one*, Harrier's mind supplied. *Thirty-one dead to rescue eight*.) But it didn't matter what the Shamblers did short of actually killing one of them, the *shotors* absolutely refused to stop.

Harrier was in the lead when they finally broke through. When his *shotor* saw the open desert ahead of it—with no Shambler between it and freedom—it broke into a run. He wanted to stop, slow it, turn, wait for the others. He would have had more success reasoning with the oncoming Sandwind. His *shotor* stretched out its neck and fled across the desert, and behind it, the nineteen survivors of the original fifty Young Hunters and the eight wounded they carried followed.

The riders were all strung out in a long column across the desert now. They reached the place where Shaiara and Zanattar and the others waited with the *shotors*. There was no chance of stopping. Harrier concentrated on not falling off. As he and the others passed them, Shaiara and the rest turned to follow. The animals carrying double burdens were lagging behind those with only their rider's weight to carry, the ones that had been waiting with Shaiara and Zanattar were behind them. Harrier just hoped the poor stupid terrified beasts would run themselves out before they ran themselves to death. He passed Bisochim and Saravasse.

“Go!” he shouted, knowing that Saravasse would hear him even if Bisochim didn't. From the look of the sky right now, it didn't matter whether he told Bisochim to release the Sandwind or not—it was about to break free. He just hoped the Sandwind would stay where Bisochim told it to.

Up ahead, Harrier saw the outriders at the back of the caravan. His *shotor* swept past them, laboring now as it fled along the side of the slowly-moving column. Their line of march was more than four miles long, and his *shotor* covered every foot of it at the same mad gallop.

It passed the head of the column and kept running. He saw Tiercel's head turn toward him in surprise, and sensed Tiercel urging his *shotor* to follow, but he knew that Tiercel wouldn't be able to catch them. But now—at last—when Harrier tapped its shoulder to signal it to slow, his *shotor* finally did, staggering in an exhausted ungainly fashion from a gallop into an unsteady walk in a matter of paces. It walked on for another few minutes—as if it couldn't believe it was still alive—and then sank to its knees with a reproachful moan.

“Yeah,” Harrier said. “I think we're stopping here for the night.”

A few moments later, Tiercel's *shotor* trotted up beside him. “Are you—Did you—Did they—Are—”

Harrier was just dismounting. He straightened, trying to ease cramped muscles. Now that the battle was over, everything seemed too loud and too quiet at the same time.

“We lost thirty-one people,” Harrier said, stopping Tiercel before he could say anything more. “But we rescued the living. Get down. I need your *shotor*.”

“You aren't going somewhere, are you?” Tiercel asked, managing to sound shocked.

Harrier groaned, making insistent circling motions with his hand. *Down, down*. Tiercel sighed in aggravation and signaled to his *shotor* to kneel.

“I'm not,” Harrier said, walking over to take the lead-rope and the goad from Tiercel. “And that poor thing really isn't. But if we're stopping here for the night—and we are—I have to ride over the area to make sure we aren't making camp on top of a Sandwalker burrow.”

“Can't—” Tiercel began, and stopped. *Can't somebody else do that?*

Unfortunately, the answer to that was “no.” Harrier didn't know if sensing Tainted creatures was a specifically Knight-Magely Gift, or if there was some other reason Bisochim couldn't do it, or if he could do it and just wouldn't. At least it was useful (unlike a lot of things that Knight-Magery did), even though it was maddeningly inconsistent. Why could he sense Sandwalkers but not Goblins, for example, and why were some of Ahairan's creatures Tainted, but not others, like the Black Dogs? It was a question that only Ahairan—maybe—could answer. And Harrier really didn't intend to ask her.

He swung himself into the saddle of Tiercel's *shotor* with a heartfelt groan and tapped it on the shoulder. As it lurched to its feet, he glanced back the way he'd come. Behind him, the desert was clear. All the *shotors* had reached the caravan. Beyond the caravan—where the Shambler army had been—there was nothing but a black wall of churning sand.



FOR about a thousand hectares in front of the caravan the desert was clear of Sandwalkers and Sandwalker burrows, and Harrier didn't feel the nagging sense of unease that would warn him that stopping here was a bad idea. That was good, because Harrier didn't think any of the twenty *shotors* that had made it back alive could be moved from where they'd laid down. Once he gave the okay, the Isvaieni went about the business of setting up the camp with quiet efficiency. Bisochim wouldn't be on hand to cast the spells to create the nightspring or make the grass grow until he'd finished with the evening's Sandwinds. Harrier didn't think that they'd get attacked by a second group of Shamblers tonight, but the army Bisochim was in the process of destroying (*the way he killed all the Wildmages in the Isvai*, Harrier

remembered, and winced) could have been a feint on Ahairan's part. It would be better to follow their usual routine and just have him scrub the desert around the camp the way he usually did, if he could.

Harrier walked through the encampment as it was being set up until he found a few people he could trust to be sensible about things and explained that he wanted the people they'd rescued fed, clothed, sheltered, tended—and Healed as soon as possible. (Though only Bisochim could do that—at least without spell-price and spell-cost and MagePrice—Harrier's pronouncements would ensure that Bisochim was told that there were people who required his spells.) He did his best to impress upon Kisrah and Marnet and Sumadar that the newcomers were to be treated as well as if they were Isvaieni—even if they weren't—because the desertfolk were perfectly capable of rescuing people and then just letting them lie on the sand as far as Harrier could tell.

After that, Harrier took one of the spare saddles and went out beyond the last row of tents, setting it down and sitting on it to stare out into the desert. He knew he should go to see the people they'd rescued—talk to them, reassure them. But he couldn't do it yet. Maybe Tiercel would.

Behind him, the noise of evening camp blended into a familiar mush of sound: the hammering of tent-pegs, the thrumming sound of a plucked tent-rope, the complaints of sheep and goats and *shotors*. Beyond that he heard—or imagined—the thin sound of the wind. The sky was darker than usual tonight—the sun had reached the horizon while he wasn't paying attention—and after a moment he realized why. Absently, he began making globes of Coldfire, setting them free to drift over the camp. *A year ago you couldn't imagine doing this*, Harrier thought vaguely, watching the glowing azure mist gather in his palms. He still didn't know how he did it. He just . . . did it.

He'd been sitting there for a bit over half an hour when Zanattar joined him. For a long time Zanattar stood beside him in silence, watching the globes of Coldfire rise up from Harrier's hands.

"I know that you believe that our war against the Border Cities was wrong," Zanattar said at last.

"It was," Harrier said curtly.

"We did not know that then," Zanattar answered.

"You killed—" Harrier forced himself to stop. "Did you have a *reason* for mentioning this now?" he said after a pause.

"This only: it was a wrongful war, and our feet were set upon its path by a Demon's treachery. This much you know. Know this as well: until that day, never had I killed a man, nor entered into battle where any man might kill me. I do not tell you this to seek your sympathy nor your forgiveness—"

"Good," Harrier said.

"—but only to say that I know what it is to ride into battle and come forth again. And to lead others into battle, and have them remain behind. It is a hard thing, to feel that gladness in your heart, knowing that your joy arises from the fact that you yet live, and feeling as if you rejoice over the death of your comrades as well."

"They weren't my '*comrades*,' Zanattar," Harrier answered harshly. "They were people I asked you to choose so they could go and die. And you did. And they did."

"But it was you who led them, Harrier," Zanattar said. "It was you who held the hope within your heart that all whom you led forth would ride back with you again. Do you think that I never chose men and women to die? I did: many times. Some knew it. Some did not. Those who died today gained the death they most wished to embrace, and the ease of knowing that their bodies would not survive to trouble us."

Another globe of Coldfire rose up into the sky. "Tell me why that's supposed to make me feel better," Harrier said.

"I do not say that it does," Zanattar answered simply. "Yet you know what I know as well: those who died today have long sought death, though they knew it not. I have done much harm in this past wheel of the seasons, seeking only to do good. Yet that which grieves me most is the injury I have done to those who live on. Once such disordered spirits as walk among my Young Hunters were rare. Sometimes the Blue Robes could Heal it. Sometimes such a one would choose, instead, to lay their bones upon the sand, for the good of all."

"Or have them laid there," Harrier said bitterly.

"Yes," Zanattar said evenly. "Even so. An *Ummara* must do that which is for the good of all, not the good of one—you have ridden with these men and women many sennights, Harrier. Would you have such a one in your tent and upon your carpet, when it might be that you must place your life—or your child's life—into their hands?"

"No," Harrier said reluctantly. "No."

"I do not seek to lighten the burden of your shame, for I know that this cannot be. I say only this: see clearly what was lost this day, and what was gained."

Harrier didn't say anything, and Zanattar didn't say anything else. Harrier went on making Coldfire, and Zanattar stood beside him in companionable silence for a few minutes more before walking away as quietly as he'd come. Harrier sat there for a while longer, making Coldfire and trying to decide whether Zanattar had been right or not. He knew Zanattar was right about why the Young Hunters had attacked the Border Cities. Bisochim had told them that the North was going to come and wipe them all out. Bisochim had told them that because Ahairan had tricked him. It was the whole "burden of his shame" thing he was mulling over.

Was it wrong to sacrifice thirty-one lives to save eight? What if the eight people they'd rescued all died before tomorrow morning? Would it have been different if the Isvaieni who'd died hadn't been people who'd "long sought death"—if they'd been people Harrier liked? Would he have made different choices if he'd known *for sure* before he'd started that thirty-one people would die? What if he'd *ordered* those people to go, and not asked Zanattar to find him volunteers?

He didn't have good answers to any of those questions.

You'd better find some—and fast, Harrier told himself savagely. *Because there's one more thing Zanattar was right about. This isn't the last time something like this is going to happen. You either need to know the answers—or you need to tell Shaiara and Liapha and everyone else counting on you to know that someone else is going to be making the decisions from now on.*

But he wasn't going to find answers here. Not tonight. He looked up and realized that he could see the stars now. Twilight was over and the Sandwind was over, too. Harrier got to his feet and picked up the saddle. Time to go back.



WHEN Harrier got to the Nazindar tent, the spare one was set up beside it. Saravasse was curled up out in front like a gigantic scarlet cat. She raised her head at his approach. "Bisochim has Healed the refugees," she said softly. "They were badly burned."

"Yeah, I bet," Harrier said. No telling how many miles they'd been forced to walk through the desert. They'd all improvised some protection for their heads and faces, but it hadn't been nearly enough. "Who are they?"

Saravasse snorted softly in amusement. "You'll have to ask them when they wake up. The badly-injured always sleep after a Healing, Harrier, you know that. I imagine they will sleep for some hours."

No point in trying to wake someone in a Healing trance—he'd had the chance to see Healing trances often enough by now. Harrier shrugged and turned away.

"Wildmage, a word with you?" Fannas asked.

Uh-oh, I'm in trouble, Harrier thought. Fannas never called him "Wildmage" except when he wanted something. And the Kareggi tents were across the

encampment on the inside of the square—even if Fannas wanted to talk to him before their usual evening meeting, he'd be more likely to loiter outside Liapha's tent—where they were held—than Shaiara's. Assuming Fannas wanted to talk to Harrier about anything that could possibly be discussed in one of their meetings.

"Sure," Harrier said.

He turned and walked back up the line of tents with Fannas. The Adanate not-a-tribe were next to the Nalzindar, and next to them were the Tunag, another tribe that had kept to the Deep Desert. Harrier had decreed the shape of the camp, but the tribes themselves had chosen the places where they would set their tents.

Tiercel had been fascinated to learn that—before Bisochim, before Ahairan—each tribe had possessed a specific territory that it ranged through, sometimes taking years to complete one elaborate criss-cross navigation of the region. None of them had claimed exclusive right to any part of the Isvai, but just as the Kareggi had rarely entered the Isvai, preferring to stay in the lush Madiran, the Nalzindar had never left the Deep Desert. When Harrier had finally realized that the tribes were positioning themselves in the encampments on the basis of what part of the desert they'd used to occupy, he'd thought of telling them to stop, then decided not to. Why borrow trouble?

"I must naturally begin by congratulating you on the bold strike you led against the forces of our enemy this day," Fannas said. "Your victory has strengthened the hearts of our people."

"I didn't win any victory," Harrier said evenly. "Ahairan stripped Akazidas'Iteru to raise an army of Shamblers to send against us. Bisochim destroyed them."

"But before he did, you rode into the heart of that great army and brought forth eight people from its midst—alive—which is truly a great blow to the power of our enemy. And now we come to the matter upon which I must touch, Wildmage. I know that no one is more aware than you are of how fine-stretched our resources are."

Every day's journey left Harrier both jittery and dragged-out by its end. Tonight he was merely so tired that he thought he might actually fall asleep standing up. It was just as well. He suspected he knew where Fannas was heading with his smarmy long-winded flattery, and on an ordinary night, he would have already lost his temper. Tonight he simply said: "Go on."

"I did not wish to raise such a delicate matter in the tribal council, for I was certain that you would prefer to consider it privately," Fannas said. "I know that you will have realized—as I have—that these refugees—poor innocent victims that they are—are merely a test the Demon is setting us. There is no question of offering them 'charity' as if we were city-dwellers. Were we even to consider it, certainly more such refugees would follow. We cannot feed ourselves, let alone—"

"Stop," Harrier said quietly. "There are eight of them. Thirty-one people died today. If you can count, Fannas, that's a net gain of twenty-three people we don't have to feed since this morning. If you'd like to go and lay your bones on the sand, we could make it twenty-four. I understand that the Isvaieni don't practice charity. I don't give a damn. My parents fed and clothed and sheltered me, and when we are fighting Demons, we are *all* members of the same family. So we will feed and clothe and shelter these people—and anyone else we can save from Ahairan." He stopped himself before he could issue an ultimatum: *If you don't like that, Fannas, you can leave—with anybody willing to go with you.*

Fannas inclined his head. "Surely it will be as you say, Wildmage. I thank you for hearing my words."

Harrier turned his back on Fannas—it was rude, but that was the nice thing about having spent this much time with the Isvaieni, he'd finally learned how to *be* rude intentionally instead of just constantly by accident—and walked back to Shaiara's tent. He stepped onto the carpet and knelt among the circle of Nalzindar.

"Fannas sought you," Ciniran said with simulated casualness, darting him a sideways glance as she handed him a mug. The water inside was cold and tasted faintly of mutton—it was spring-water cut with a little of the highly-salted broth that was their staple food. A year ago, Harrier wouldn't have believed it would be possible to survive, let alone do day after day of grueling labor on nothing much more than clear soup—but anything was possible if you were desperate enough. More broth was being cooked and would be ready by morning, but these days the Isvaieni boiled the carcasses of the slaughtered animals in the largest pots they had until it was nothing but bones, and then distributed the broth equally among all the tents. Harrier was doing everything he could think of to avoid the possibility—or even the accusation—of food hoarding.

"Fannas found me. He wanted to tell me that we shouldn't feed and clothe the people we rescued today," Harrier answered. He handed back the mug, and Ciniran refilled it.

"Huh," Shaiara said dismissively. "The Blue-Robes do as the Wild Magic wills. I do not see Fannas wearing the Blue Robe."

Harrier sighed. He didn't want to argue with Shaiara, even if she seemed to be agreeing with his position for the wrong reason completely. "Dogs fed?" he asked instead.

"Yes." Ciniran sighed. "It takes a whole goat to feed them now."

"I hate goats anyway," Harrier answered.

When the Black Dogs had slaughtered almost every *ikulas* hound the Isvaieni possessed, a few had survived: two litters of puppies eight sennights old, fifty-two older puppies between the ages of three and eight moonturns. Despite everything they could do, the tribes had lost all but three of the nursing puppies in the next fortnight, but the others had thrived. They'd still lost nineteen of the older puppies over the next several sennights—to *atish 'banjarrari*, *atish 'ban-barghusi*, Shambler, Sandwalker, or simply because the animal had simply vanished and not even a Finding or a Calling spell could retrieve it. The other thirty-five were energetic and healthy, and to the bottom of Great Ocean with Fannas and his demi-sun-pinching ways: having the dogs around to fuss over reminded them all of why they were doing this. Harrier had no intention of even suggesting they get rid of—or, Light defend him!—*eat* the puppies just to save a goat a day.

Which brought him inevitably around to Fannas, though Harrier really wished it didn't. He knew perfectly well that "*Surely it will be as you say*," was the way the Isvaieni said *Yeah, like that's going to happen*.

Thirteen



Discoveries and Alliances

THERE WASN'T MUCH to talk about at the meeting that evening. Harrier thought that Fannas looked a little surprised that he brought up the question of taking care of the people they'd rescued as soon as they'd discussed everything else. Tiercel actually looked shocked at the suggestion of killing them—which was what it would amount to if they didn't actively care for them—but it occurred to Harrier that he hadn't seen Tiercel at all since he'd swiped Tiercel's *shotor*, and right now, Tiercel looked like somebody who'd swallowed a live snake.

"I'm sure you'll all want to discuss it among yourselves—at great length," Harrier said once he'd summarized both sides of the conversation he'd had with Fannas. "Let me know what you decide. I've told you what I think."

"And should the tribes think differently?" Fannas asked, regarding him with narrowed eyes. "Will you then abide by our will for the good of all?"

"Hell no," Harrier said indignantly. "I'll *leave*. Uh, anyone who wants can come with me, of course," he added conscientiously.

"The Nalzindar will go with Harrier," Shaiara said calmly.

"And the Kadyastar will go with the Nalzindar," Liapha remarked blandly. She made a clucking noise with her tongue. "Young man, if you were so eager to join Sathan and his Barantar, you need only have brought forth those words at the proper time, you know. But no matter! Why, even now Ahairan must be looking about herself and saying: 'whatever shall I do for fresh Shamblers?' I'm sure she would welcome you, and any Kareggi who have entirely taken leave of their wits."

"This isn't solving anything!" Tiercel said loudly, before anybody else could say anything.

"It is not," Omuta agreed gently. "I must ask: can the lives of eight people be more important than maintaining accord among us all?"

Harrier rested his elbows on his knees and dug the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. He'd had a long brutal day and now Omuta wanted to argue philosophy. Well, that was a Fadaryama for you. "No," he said. "They can't."

Beside him, Tiercel opened his mouth to speak.

"Shut up," Harrier said. "Not their lives, Omuta. But . . . the idea . . ." He struggled to put into words things he'd never even thought about before he'd come to the south, and right now he didn't care whether he died, won, or got rescued, as long as he didn't have to think about them ever again. "We can't just kill people because it's convenient," he finally said. "We can't kill them because we're scared. Or greedy," he added, looking at Fannas. "Or because we think something might happen but we don't *know*. Those people are not Tainted. They were Ahairan's victims. They are the same people we're trying to save by doing . . . They're the people we're trying to *save*, Omuta. I'm not going to kill them. Anybody who wants them dead is on Ahairan's side, not mine." He got to his feet and looked at Fannas. "Pick a side. This is the last time I'll ask."

"I merely wished to raise the matter for discussion, Wildmage," Fannas said with pretended sincerity. "Omuta is right. The lives of eight people are not worth discord among us. Now, as before, I follow you against Ahairan."



"I STILL trust Fannas about as far as I can throw Saravasse," Harrier said. "One-handed." He and Tiercel were walking back to the tent, but for some reason Tiercel had decided he didn't want to take the straightest path, so Shaiara and Ciniran would get there way ahead of them.

"Yeah," Tiercel said. "Har, there's something you don't know."

"What happened today?" Harrier demanded instantly, because the only thing he could think of was that it was something—had to be—about Tiercel and Ahairan, and it was the last thing in the world he wanted to even have to think about, but he didn't dare wait.

"No, it isn't . . . anything you're thinking," Tiercel said, still in that oddly nervous tone.

"Fine," Harrier said in exasperation. "Tell me what I'm not thinking."

"After Bisochim Healed the people you rescued, and made the night spring, I went into the tent with Tukildu and Gindin and Thara—they're Tabingana—"

"Tyr, I don't care if they're *shotors*," Harrier snapped.

"—because they were afraid to go alone, and anyway they needed light, and Saravasse said that the people needed to be washed and clothed. So they took water and clothes—"

"And a Deep Ocean Trader and *get to the point*."

"The people you rescued—they're from Armethalieh. I recognized some of them. One of them is your brother Eugens."

If you could be used to being shocked, Harrier had gotten used to it in the last half-year. Shocked, and terrified, and horrified, and confronted with awful, unbelievable things that he had no choice but to accept as his reality and deal with in the best way he could manage. But Tiercel's simple ordinary statement—*your brother is here*—was almost too much for Harrier to stand. It was as if the two halves of his life—Before and Now—had come crashing into each other with stunning force. The ground seemed to tilt slowly beneath his feet as if it were the deck of a ship, and Tiercel grabbed his arm to steady him.

"He can't be," Harrier said hoarsely. "He's in Armethalieh. He's in the Customs House." Eugens was the oldest of the Gillain offspring, thirteen years older than Harrier. He'd married early, to the middle Corolen daughter, and Eugens and Naneida had three children. There was no reason between Sand and Star for Eugens to have been in the middle of a Shambler army hundreds of miles from home.

"He's here," Tiercel said.

"I want to see him," Harrier said, with as much hostility as if Tiercel was saying he couldn't. It wasn't fair to be angry. It wasn't Tiercel's fault Eugens was here.

But all Tiercel said was, "They'll all still be asleep," and followed him.

"I didn't recognize half of them," Tiercel said a few moments later, following Harrier to the tent where the Armethaliehans were, "but I did know who three of the others were. Magistrate Perizel is an important Junior Magistrate in Chief Magistrate Vaunnel's office, and she's brought her Principal Clerk with her. Breulin, I think his

name is—I only met him once. And Lord Felocan is here.”

From his tone of voice, Tiercel had no idea why Harrier was gritting his teeth and trying to care, because it was going to be important. He knew that. “Felocan is who?” Harrier managed to ask.

“Oh. Tasoaire is the family. Lord Felocan is the second son. His older brother Astrudin will inherit the title if Lord Tasoaire ever dies, along with whatever money there is. Lord Tasoaire hates both his sons, so he’s planning to live forever, and Astrudin hates Felocan, so he’ll set fire to his entire inheritance rather than see Felocan gain a demi-sun of value from it.”

Tiercel rattled on about Armethalichan politics as if that was the most normal subject in the world to be talking about. Harrier looked around at the tents, and thought about getting up that morning, and about everything that had happened in all the hours since, and thought it would seem utterly reasonable to him right now if the sand suddenly turned blue, or if all of a sudden the sky was patterned like one of Shaiara’s carpets, or if all the *shotors* turned into unicorns between one heartbeat and the next. Everything seemed equally ridiculous, and equally likely.

“You’re tired,” Tiercel said, breaking off and looking at him.

And you might be a pawn of Ahairan, and I have no idea of what you’re going to do when you figure out that’s what I think, and I don’t know why Eugens is here, and it’s been a damned long day. “Yeah,” Harrier said.

“It’s not much farther,” Tiercel said, and Harrier bit back a snappish answer about how he knew exactly how far it was to his own tent, thank you, and if Tiercel hadn’t dragged them the long way around they’d already be there. Tiercel had done it out of kindness, he knew that, wanting to give him the news in as much privacy as they could get.



WHEN Harrier stepped into the doorway of the tent, the globe of Mage-Light Tiercel had Summoned earlier was still here. It was a large one, and the inside of the tent was dimly but clearly lit. Bisochim had Healed the refugees, and the Tabingana had obviously washed them clean of the filth their ordeal had left behind before dressing them in undertunics. Each of them lay on a sleeping-mat, breathing in the slow deep sleep of a Healing trance. Neatly-folded sets of garments—overtunic and outer robe and inner sash and outer sash and *chadar*—lay waiting at the head of each mat. Isvaieni garments weren’t exactly tailored, so there probably hadn’t been much difficulty in finding things that would fit. By now they had a lot of spare garments. Too many.

Harrier was grateful to see that his instructions had been followed so exactly. He’d always tried to be careful not to give orders to the Isvaieni, because Shaiara had told him over and over that the desertfolk didn’t even take orders from their own *Ummarai*. When Zanattar had led an army against the *Iteru*-cities, he’d only given orders during the actual battles. Everything between those battles—including whether or not to continue having them—had been a matter of common agreement. But more and more, since the day Harrier had given the tribes the choice of whether or not to continue north with him, he’d known that his “suggestions” were sinking to the level of flat out demands: *do this*. And most of the time it was things that he could justify as being for everyone’s good. But today, the orders he’d given had been anything but that. The Isvaieni had followed them anyway, and he felt a little uneasy about it. More than a little uneasy. But there wasn’t anything he could do about it. He couldn’t talk about his fears to Shaiara or Zanattar or Saravasse—and Light knew he couldn’t mention them to Tiercel. If he was falling in with Ahairan’s plans by turning the Isvaieni into an actual army, he’d just have to hope that somebody would stop him before it was too late.

Harrier walked further into the tent and squatted down by the head of Eugens’s sleeping-mat. Until this moment, Harrier had held out a hope he hadn’t quite recognized that Tiercel might somehow be wrong, even knowing that Tiercel had spent almost as much time in the Gillain household growing up as Harrier had. He smoothed his brother’s hair away from his forehead. All four of the Gillain boys had inherited their mother’s red hair; even in the MageLight, Harrier could tell that Eugens’s was bleached out almost to the color of new copper, the result of too much time bareheaded under the desert sun. Eugens’s face looked strange with its thick unkempt growth of beard. The beard could be combed, and even trimmed, but Isvaieni men didn’t shave. Shaving required the luxury of water to waste. He was semnnights overdue for a haircut, too. Harrier wondered when his last one had been.

“Boots are going to be a problem,” Harrier said quietly, withdrawing his hand. “I know we’re carrying a couple of dozen spare pairs by now, but . . . they’ll have to fit.”

“We can find something for them in the morning,” Tiercel said. He hadn’t moved from his place in the doorway. “You should come to bed now, Har.”

“Yeah,” Harrier said absently. “I think I’ll just sit up here a little while first. You go on.”



A FEW minutes after Tiercel left, Ciniran and Natha came into the tent. Ciniran brought Harrier’s heavy desertcloak and two filled waterskins, Natha carried an armload of blankets.

“They are *charity*,” Natha said, with a wicked smile as she tasted the unfamiliar word. “From the Kareggi.”

“I am pleased that Fannas has seen fit to walk in the Light,” Harrier answered automatically. It was only after the words left his mouth that he realized why they sounded so familiar: the Preceptor of the Portside Light-temple had said them often enough, whenever one side or the other of Armethalich Port’s many feuding factions had finally decided to see reason.

Ciniran snorted rudely. “It is a *bribe*,” she said, as Natha went to lay blankets over each of the sleeping figures. “Fannas fears to be cast out.”

“By me?” Harrier asked blankly. “Only if he tries to steal food.” It was the one rule he’d been willing to absolutely enforce as soon as he’d realized how bad things were: there would be no food hoarding or theft.

Ciniran shook her head at that absurdity. “By the Kareggi, Harrier, for being such a sunstruck fool. Do they cast him from their tents, he must find another’s to take him in—or he must go to lay his bones upon the sand.”

Harrier would like to think Ciniran was joking, but by now he knew she wasn’t. Whatever the Kareggi did or didn’t do about Fannas, though, they weren’t going to do it before morning. He shrugged into his cloak gratefully and settled down cross-legged on the carpet. “Thank you, Ciniran. I’ll rest so much easier knowing that Fannas will be spending tonight worrying,” Harrier said dryly.

Ciniran smiled, slightly puzzled, and turned to go. “Rest well, Harrier.”

Of course he would.

What was more restful than having your family come to visit when you were being persecuted by a Demon?



IT was about a chime before First Dawn Bells, the hour at which the Gillain household had awakened since long before Harrier had been born. The camp was at its quietest—here at the edge, Harrier could hear the faint *crump* of the *shotors*’ pads on the sand as the sentries rode their patrols around its border, and even the goats

were silent.

Now and then one of the eight sleepers would stir slightly, but none of them had really moved. Harrier had been catnapping, rousing every half-chime or so only to see that nothing had changed. He knew he'd pay for this mostly-sleepless night later, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to leave, and the longer he'd spent here, the less point there'd seemed to be in going back to his own sleeping-mat just to catch an hour or two—at best—of fitful sleep. When the caravan moved out today he'd take a place somewhere in the middle and sleep then.

Suddenly Eugens thrashed violently—as if he were having a bad dream—and sat bolt upright, clawing at his skin and at the blanket that covered him as if he didn't know what they were. Harrier quickly got to his knees at Eugens's side, grabbing his wrists.

"It's okay," he said. "You're safe. Gens, it's me."

Eugens stopped struggling after a moment, but he stared at Harrier with no trace of recognition at all. "Who are you?" he finally said, licking dry lips.

"It's me," Harrier repeated. "Harrier. Your brother."

For a moment he was afraid that whatever had happened to Eugens at Ahairan's hands—and in the hands of the Shamblers—had done something to his mind, but after a long moment, confusion was replaced by disbelief. "*Harrier?*" Eugens said. "Light deliver us! We thought you were dead!"



"WE got your last letter at the beginning of Ice—last year—you must have paid for Courier Post, because you said you'd written it from Ysterialpoerin at the beginning of Vintage," Eugens said.

"I think so. It's hard to remember," Harrier answered.

He'd gotten Eugens on his feet and helped him dress in the clothes that had been left for him. When he'd gone to help Eugens fold his *chadar* into place, Eugens had waved it aside. Harrier hadn't pressed the matter. It was still dark. When Eugens had walked outside, Harrier hadn't stopped him. They hadn't seen any normal *jarrari* since they'd gotten to the Isvai, and if they were attacked by another infestation of *atish'ban-jarrari*, it wouldn't matter whether Eugens had boots on or not.

"And since then—nothing! Harrier, it's been almost sixteen moonturns since you wrote that letter! Where have you *been?*?" Eugens demanded.

"That long?" Harrier asked in surprise. He tried to remember. They'd sent their letters just before going to the Caves of Imrathalion—how long had they spent in Karahelanderialigor? A moonturn? More? Two moonturns in Tarnatha'Iteru—no, two and a half—and he had to work backward from there—

"Is that all you have to say?" Eugens said angrily. "Ma's been weeping her eyes out, Da's been in a temper—he and Lord Rolfort are cross as two sticks—you can't even imagine what kind of nonsense Tyr talked in his last letter—"

Harrier winced, just a little, at the sheer volume of Eugens's voice. If everyone along this line of tents wasn't awake already, they would be soon. "I didn't ask him what he wrote," he said wearily, "but whatever it was, it wasn't nonsense. Isn't the way you got here proof of that?"

In the dim light of the lanterns hanging on the front of the tent, he saw Eugens scrub his hand over his face. "I don't know what to believe anymore. But for Light's sake, Har—he's Lord Rolfort's oldest son, not Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy! Look, if the two of you will just come home—if you *can* come home . . ."

"We're trying, Gens," Harrier said. "You might have noticed you're a little far from normal shipping lanes here."

Eugens stared around for a moment, then shook his head again. "I don't know . . ." he said. "Did they take you prisoner too?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" Harrier asked. "The Shamblers? Oh, no, Gens. Everybody here's alive."

His brother stared at him in shock, and it occurred to Harrier that he hadn't answered whatever question his brother had actually asked.

"Look," Harrier said. "Maybe you should start from the beginning. Because when I left Armethalieh—*almost two years ago*—"you were safe in the Customs House, not . . . in the middle of the Isvai."

"You were only supposed to be gone a moonturn and a half," Eugens said. "Up to Sentarshadeen with Tiercel and back, and then Brelt would join me in the Customs House." Eugens sighed. "The Isvai. Is that what they call this Dark-damned hellhole?" Another sigh. "You didn't come back. Tiercel didn't come back. We started getting . . . letters. So did the Rolforts. It all sounded like . . . we knew he'd been sick. We didn't know what to think. After your last letters came, Lord Rolfort sent to his bankers in Ysterialpoerin—as soon as the passes were clear—to search for you there. There'd been no sign of either of you in the city in moonturns. We gave up then. What else could we do?" Eugens was pacing back and forth now, up and down the line of tents, not paying any attention at all to whose carpets he walked on.

"Nothing," Harrier said in a low voice. He paced Eugens, on the sand at the edge of the carpets. "Nothing but what you did."

"The Madiran caravans were late this year—well, actually, they didn't come at all. Around the end of Seedtime we started getting people coming up from the Border Cities—hundreds of them—saying the desert tribes were attacking them. So Chief Magistrate Vaunnel appointed a commission to come down and investigate."

Now it was Harrier's turn to stare in disbelief. "Vaunnel heard that the Isvaieni were sacking the *Iteru*-cities and she sent *you?* Why didn't she call up the levies?"

Eugens stopped his pacing and stared at him. "*Chief Magistrate* Vaunnel didn't just send *me,*" he said irritably, emphasizing her title. "She sent a full Commission of Inquiry. Sixteen people. Why should she call up the levies on the basis of something that might be a misunderstanding—or not true—or *Light and Darkness*, Har, she sent us down here to find out whether or not she *should* call up the levies, and because it was faster than exchanging dispatches with the *Iteru*-Consuls all season! We were supposed to, well, *inquire*. She asked Da to send someone from the family because she thought he'd listen better to one of us if she had to ask him for a fleet to carry troops down the coast, and Carault's indentured and—for some odd reason—Brelt is now Da's apprentice, and that left *me.*"

Harrier winced. Brelt was second-oldest, and of course he would have taken Harrier's place as Apprentice Harbormaster. It still hurt to have Eugens throw it in his face like that. "So did you? Inquire?"

"We got to Akazidas'Iteru. That's—"

"I know what it is, Gens, I've been here for half a year," Harrier said sharply.

Eugens gave him another suspicious glance, but was willing to continue with his story instead of stopping to scold Harrier again. "The city was packed with refugees just like the ones who'd come to Armethalieh—but a lot more of them. Consul Tacanin lodged the Commission in the Consular Palace, and helped us interrogate some of them. It was useless."

"Really?" Harrier said earnestly.

Eugens shrugged. "None of them had seen this so-called 'Desert Army'—all they'd done was decided one was coming and fled. Lord Felocan thought it might be some kind of mass hysteria, and Magistrate Perizel didn't find any evidence in the depositions of an actual tribal uprising."

"Consul Aldarnas didn't think it was 'mass hysteria.' He sent his family to Armethalieh a moonturn before Tarnatha'Iteru was destroyed. Or didn't anybody talk to them before you left Armethalieh?" Harrier asked scornfully. *Would you like me to introduce you to the head of the "tribal uprising," Gens? Would that help?* He didn't know why he was trying so hard to convince his brother that there *had* been a tribal uprising. It was going to be hard enough to explain the current situation without adding in the fact that the Isvaieni who had destroyed ten of the eleven *Iteru*-cities were on their side now.

"I . . . don't . . . know," Eugens said evenly. "Consul Tacanin was concerned by the fact that there hadn't been any trade caravans, because they start gathering at Akazidas'Iteru in Rains, waiting for the northern end of the road to be passable. I wanted to go and *look*, because some of the refugees were from Tarnatha'Iteru, and

if Tamatha'Iteru had been attacked, that would be enough proof that the other cities had been attacked, too."

"That would have been in . . .?" Harrier asked.

Eugens shrugged. "Beginning of Meadowbloom, I think."

As best Harrier could make out, working backward and forward, and not being sure precisely *when* anything was—since he suspected he'd lost more than a moonturn or two on the road from Karahelanderialigor—the beginning of Meadowbloom would have been only a sennight or two after the destruction of Tamatha'Iteru. If Eugens had gone to see the city when he'd wanted to, he probably would have gotten there while Ancaladar and both of them were still camping out in the ruins of Zanattar's tents trying to decide what to do next. How much of everything that followed would have been different if that had happened?

"But you didn't go," Harrier prompted.

"No." Eugens half-groaned. "None of the rest of the Commission thought it was a good idea—especially if there *were* bandits running around the Border Cities—and Consul Tacanin said I'd need guides and horses—and supplies—and a whole manifest of things that weren't available in order to make the trip. So I stayed in Akazidas'Iteru and tried to find out what I could from there. It was enough to convince me that something bad was going on. Plague, bandit gangs, tainted wells—there were a lot of different explanations. I didn't know what Magistrate Perizel or Lord Felocan were going to say, but I was going to recommend a relief expedition large enough to bypass Akazidas'Iteru and . . ." Eugens stopped, staring off into the desert. "They've all been destroyed, haven't they?"

"Yes," Harrier said quietly. "They're gone."

"Akazidas'Iteru is gone," Eugens said, as if it had just occurred to him. "We were going to leave. It was the middle of Sunkindle, and we were going to leave because the weather was getting too hot to stay . . ." All the animation and anger had drained from Eugens's voice and body, as if he was only now becoming aware of where he was and the things that had happened to bring him here. He swayed on his feet, and Harrier took him by the arm and led him back toward his tent.

Of all the *unfairnesses* that Harrier had experienced since he'd set out with Tiercel on the road to Sentarshadeen, he thought this was the worst. Eugens was his oldest brother—an adult Harrier's entire life—and seeing him lost and afraid was almost as bad as seeing *Da* lost and afraid. "Come on," he said gently, urging Eugens to sit down on the carpet outside the tent. "Sit down. Here, have a drink." He took down the waterskin hanging on the tent-pole and handed it to Eugens.

"It's *water*," Eugens said in surprise, after squirting a little of the contents into his mouth.

"Of course it is," Harrier answered, baffled. "What did you think it would be?" He sat down beside his brother and put a hand on his arm. Looking upward toward the sky, Harrier could see that it was starting to lighten, and he could feel the camp coming to life around them. Soon the illusion of privacy would be gone. "Gens, I need to know what happened at Akazidas'Iteru."

"No," Eugens said. "Nobody should have to know those things." He tried to smile. It was painful to watch. "Not my little brother. I'll take you home, and, oh, *Da* will yell for a while, but it will be all right. You'll see."

Harrier wasn't sure whether he wanted to cry or scream or go find something to hit. *Gens, you said you were going to leave Akazidas'Iteru in the middle of Sunkindle, and I think it's at least the end of Harvest now and that's two and a half moonturns and as well as I can figure it you're a thousand miles south of Akazidas'Iteru now and I need to know what happened to you and what happened to it. And don't tell me what I don't need to know when I've spent the past moonturn chopping up the bodies of people I've spent two moonturns before that getting to know . . .*

"Look," he said, instead of saying all the things he wanted to say. "I need to go find you a pair of boots. You'd better stay right here, okay? Wandering around barefoot isn't a really good idea. There are *jarrari*. And . . . things."

Eugens shook his head slightly—whether he was agreeing, or just being amused by his little brother's foolishness, Harrier didn't know. Harrier got to his feet and turned to go when Eugens called him back. "Harrier? You have swords strapped to your back."

Harrier turned around. "I, uh, yeah. I, um, I learned to use a sword while I've been away."

"That's probably a good idea," Eugens said very seriously. "You might need it."



TIERCEL hadn't wanted to leave Harrier alone to keep watch over Eugens. Harrier had looked more than tired. He'd looked haggard. But Tiercel had also known—especially after the stunning ultimatum Harrier had delivered to Fannas at the evening meeting—that any attempt to tell Harrier anything he didn't want to hear right now would just trigger another argument, if not an exchange of blows. And he didn't want that.

It was funny, Tiercel thought (except it wasn't). He'd been the one who'd had the dreams that had gotten the two of them into this whole mess, and Jermayan and Idalia had been so certain that the Elven prophecies about the return of Darkness were all supposed to apply to him: Tiercel Rolfort, High Mage. Harrier becoming a Knight-Mage was just something kind of . . . tacked-on afterward, an afterthought by the Wild Magic after the two of them had left Karahelanderialigor. Even Harrier insisted—even after everything that had happened—that Tiercel was the important one, the one who could (even now) find an answer if there *was* an answer. But Tiercel was the one who felt like the afterthought, and he'd felt that way for so long that there were times he wondered if the Elves had gotten it all backwards, if his whole purpose had been to bring Harrier with him and make sure that Harrier had the chance to become a Knight-Mage.

He wished Ancaladar were here. Not for the power the Dragonbond would give him. Just to talk to. Just to *ask*. Ancaladar had always had a way of helping him sort through his thoughts and see things clearly, and Tiercel missed that more than all the magic he could no longer do, more than flying through the sky, more than the glamour of being able to say, even if only inside his own mind: *I am a Dragonbond Mage*.

He missed his *friend*.

But there was nothing to do about it, except to torture himself, one more time, with all the things he could have done differently that day, that sennight, that *moonturn*, to make things turn out some other way. And that was both exhausting and too familiar. He sent himself to sleep with it anyway.

And he dreamed.

It wasn't a real dream—those were jumbled and illogical, and so bizarre that Tiercel jarred himself from one to the next even while he was dreaming by recognizing their improbability—and it wasn't one of the horrible eavesdropping dreams where it was as if Ahairan was whispering her thoughts into his ear. Those were just as chaotic and irrational as his real dreams—only he couldn't turn them into a different dream—and when he woke up he knew he'd dreamed them, and he felt angry and unclear, but he couldn't quite put what he'd dreamed into words. It wasn't one of the strange clear visions he'd had back at the beginning either—and he was grateful for that.

No, it was something else entirely.

It was almost as if it was a *memory* of a dream, faint and indistinct, as if he was trying to imagine someone else's dream from their description of it. But he was asleep, and dreaming. Only his dream had no color, no form, no shape. It was like trying to *construct* the dream . . .

. . . and failing.

Are you ready to remember me? someone kept asking him. *Are you ready to remember me?*

And he wasn't. He couldn't.

When he woke up, Tiercel felt as if his head was overstuffed and he hadn't slept at all. Someone was arguing—loudly—outside the tent, and at first he could only hear one side of it, until finally the other person raised his voice too.

Harrier. And Eugens.

There was a sudden soft light as someone inside their tent uncovered the lantern. Tiercel looked around. Everyone was awake. "It's his brother," Tiercel said. "I guess he woke up." He'd told Shaiara when he'd come back to the tent last night that one of the people they'd saved that day was Harrier's brother Eugens, and that Harrier hadn't known until after he'd talked to Fannas that evening.

"Here is a tangle of jesses knotted past saving," Kamar said, listening to the voices outside.

"You have said that this brother is the eldest," Shaiara said, as Tiercel reached for his boots. "And the Golden City is far from here—far, even, from Akazidas'Iteru. Does he not have duties there?"

She wasn't asking him—because she knew perfectly well he didn't have answers—but Shaiara never chattered idly. These were questions that she wanted answers to, and Tiercel knew she expected him to get them. He shrugged, tapping his boots and then yanking them on. That done, he got to his feet. "I can see what I can find out. I should go sit in the other tent anyway, in case the others wake up. I mean, if Eugens is awake . . ." his voice trailed off.

"That is a good thought, Tiercel," Ciniran said warmly. "They will wish to know that they have been rescued from their enemies."

Sort of, Tiercel thought. He'd developed a theory about why the Armethaliehans were here—it would account for why one of the City Magistrates and someone like Lord Felocan was here, anyway, and he didn't like it much. He'd just reached the doorway of the tent when Harrier came careening through it, not looking where he was going. If Tiercel hadn't grabbed him by the shoulders and held on, they both would have fallen.

"Are you . . ." Tiercel said, and stopped, and tried again. "Everyone could hear."

"Gens wants me to go home with him," Harrier said, and his voice wavered so much that Tiercel wasn't sure whether Harrier was going to laugh or cry. "He says that Da will be a little mad at first, but everything will work out. He thinks you're crazy, though."

"Oh, Har," Tiercel said. He couldn't think of what to say. He knew that Harrier wouldn't want false comfort, and if the truth was going to be horrible, he wouldn't want that either. "I'll go sit with him for a while."

Harrier nodded and walked across the tent. Tiercel wasn't really sure he had any idea of where he was going. Tiercel glanced toward Ciniran and Shaiara, hoping he didn't look as helpless as he felt, and walked out of the tent. It wasn't quite dawn, and still freezing cold. The desert always had an odd "wet-paper" smell at this hour—at least the Isvai did. The Barahileth had always smelled sharp and raw in the early morning, a smell composed of *ishmain* and salt flats, until the baking heat overwhelmed everything with the scent of dust, as it would here in only an hour or so.

He pulled his desertcloak tighter around himself and walked over to Eugens. Eugens had gotten to his feet, and looked as if he might be thinking of walking off somewhere. "You really ought to stay here. On the carpet. Until we can find you a pair of boots, at least," Tiercel said.

Eugens turned at the sound of his voice. "Tiercel," he said, and stopped, as if he'd simply run out of things to say. After a moment he ran a hand through his hair and said: "You know, I have no idea of where we are."

"About a sennight away from Saphthiruk Oasis. We're planning to stop there for a while," Tiercel answered.

"I—you know, you shouldn't. You should just keep going. We need to get out of this desert as fast as we can," Eugens said. He looked around nervously.

"You don't have to worry about the Shamblers—those things that had you," Tiercel said. "Bisochim destroyed all of them. Look, I know I can't imagine what you've gone through. But I understand more than you think."

Eugens laughed, and the sound was loud and ragged. "How can you?"

"Because a year ago last Flowering I started having visions of a Demon returning to the world," Tiercel said, taking a deep breath. "And she did. Here. Her name is Ahairan. She created the Shamblers, and she destroyed Akazidas'Iteru, and—"

"You summoned her up?" Eugens asked in horror.

"No!" Tiercel blurted in horror. "I . . ." He realized he was going to have to explain most of it, and he tried to remember what he'd put in the last letter he'd sent from Ysterialpoerin, even though he hadn't known the half of what he faced then. "The Elves had a prophecy that Darkness would be reborn. And that a High Mage would be born who would be able to figure out how to destroy it. I went to the Elven Lands, and they told me it was me."

"You?" Eugens said in disbelief, and Tiercel winced.

"Yeah, well, I guess they got that part wrong," Tiercel snapped, irritated in spite of himself, "because the Darkness has been reborn, and I haven't done much about destroying it. But I didn't summon her up."

"A Demon," Eugens said. He stared at Tiercel. "I don't . . . The Wildmages will protect us. I . . . They *have* to."

"I'm sorry, Eugens. Almost all the ones in the Madiran are dead, and I don't think the ones in the North know about this yet. It would be nice if they did, but . . . Wildmage magic won't have any effect against Ahairan. Just against most of her creatures," Tiercel said as gently as he could.

"You're just a boy, Tyr. You shouldn't be here at all," Eugens said again. He sounded dazed.

"Well, I *am* here. I've been here for the last five moonturns, trying to stop her," Tiercel said, still trying to make his voice gentle. "And you really can't tell me anything more horrible than the things I've already seen."

"In another two days, we would have been on the road for home," Eugens said, sounding weary and bitter. He looked down at himself, and then held out his hands to inspect them, frowning. "This isn't right. My hands . . ."

"Bisochim and Saravasse Healed you after we rescued you," Tiercel said.

Eugens turned away from him, staring out over the desert. The Nalzindar's tent was always on the western side of the square, so the desert was still nearly dark, but only the brightest stars remained visible in the sky. "You remember Tarrel Arhaus, don't you, Tyr?" Eugens asked, after a long pause.

It seemed like a bizarre question, but Tiercel nodded slowly. "He was in my class at the Normal," he answered. Tarrel, like Harrier, had been destined for an apprenticeship, not University. Unlike Harrier, he would have entered into it that summer.

"His family apprenticed him to Da. He had a good head with numbers. His older brother Rhon is First Mate on the *Mayfly*. Does the Out Islands run, married to the middle Carmasian girl—I never can remember her name—Margoree? I think. Yes. Margoree. So I thought Tarrel could do with some seasoning, and Master Arhaus and Da were of a mind, so I brought him along south with me. Ah, what in the name of the Light do I tell his mother? How can dead men stand up again and walk?"

"Ahairan did it," Tiercel answered. "She made the Shamblers. She's been doing it for a while now. I'm sorry." He saw Eugens shiver—with cold as much as with grief and horror. "Come on back inside the tent. We can find you a cloak later, but at least you can wrap up in a blanket now."

When he went inside the tent with Eugens, he saw that the other sleepers were beginning to stir.

Magistrate Perizel was young to be holding even the post of Junior Magistrate (so Tiercel's father said). Tukildu and Gindin and Thara had done the best they could with her long blonde hair, but in the end they'd simply had to hack it off, since there'd been no way to comb the mats out of it. She had the fine-boned build that people always called "Old Armethaliehan," which was just silly, since Harrier's family had been in Armethalieh since before they'd put up the first walls, practically, and Harrier

was about as fine-boned as a mule.

Her clerk, Kave Breulin, was probably about five or six years younger than she was. Tiercel could only guess so closely because Breulin had exactly the sort of job *he* would have had if he'd gone on to Armethalieh University and graduated: Magistrate's Clerk. He was dark-haired where Tiercel was fair, but other than that, Tiercel and Kave looked enough alike to be cousins. There was probably some relationship between the Breulins and the Rolforts, actually, if you traced the lineages back far enough; all the noble families of Armethalieh had done a lot of intermarrying at one point.

Lord Felocan was the oldest of anyone here, and Tiercel wondered how he'd managed to survive what had to have been a brutal journey. His curly sandy-blond hair had been pulled back into a tightly braided club and then wrapped with ribbon, so they hadn't had to cut it. It looked odd fluffed out around his face now, because even in sleep, there was nothing soft about him. He had a heavy gold earring in one ear, studded with red cabochon stones, and Tiercel wondered why the earring looked so strange until he realized that none of the others was wearing any jewelry at all.

The other four people they'd rescued he didn't know. There was a girl who looked as if she might be a year or two older than he was, whose long coppery hair, the Tabigana had said, might be saved if she had the patience to comb through it; two brown-haired men who looked as if they'd probably once been heavysset and now had the slack jowly skin of people who have lost too much flesh too fast; and a blonde woman—also once-plump—whose hair, at least, had been short to begin with. Tiercel wasn't sure why he thought the last three were Merchant class. He just did.

Lord Felocan awoke first, going from sleep, through the dazed half-consciousness that followed a Healing Trance, to full wakefulness so quickly that the intermediate state might almost not have been there at all. He sat up, brushing the hair out of his face, and looked around in bafflement. "Master Gillain," he said in bafflement, his voice hoarse with disuse. His gaze then passed to Tiercel.

"Tiercel Rolfort," Tiercel said quickly. He was saved from having to start the same long circular explanation he suspected Harrier had made to Eugens by Magistrate Perizel's awakening, and by the time he'd introduced himself to her, Eugens had already begun explaining, well, *something* to Lord Felocan, and the others were also beginning to awaken.

Very quickly everyone was awake, and Tiercel discovered that the young woman was Vianse Pallocons, Lord Felocan's Chief of Staff, and that the other three were Master Benke Froilax—who served on the Council of the Provenderers Trade Guild back in Armethalieh—Goodlady Leiled Oriadan, and her husband, Goodsir Arhos Oriadan. Goodsir Arhos Oriadan was Master Froilax's brother-in-law. Tiercel could hear the morning sounds of the camp being struck coming from all around them, but no one inside the tent paid any attention. They were too busy talking—to Tiercel and to each other. His sister Handene, Goodsir Oriadan proudly announced to Tiercel, was happily married to Master Froilax and at home in their lovely house in the Valley with their six fine children. The statement struck Tiercel as so bizarre under the circumstances that he simply stared. Goodlady Oriadan smacked her husband sharply on the back of the head and called him a pushing fool, then went on to explain to Tiercel that she and her husband were both Clerks of the Provenderers Guild.

The eight of them were the only members of *The Armethaliehan Commission to Inquire into the Madiran Unrest* who'd survived, but none of them had said *what* they'd survived.

"It is good to see someone from Armethalieh, Lord Tiercel," Magistrate Perizel said. "After we have eaten, you must take us to someone in authority, so that we may make plans on how to deal with this situation."

Tiercel assumed that Eugens had explained to Magistrate Perizel how she and the others had gotten here, but he couldn't imagine what to say to her now. Just then Ciniran looked in at the doorway.

"Shaiara wishes to know if we may strike the tent now, Tiercel. And Kamar has brought some boots that he thinks may fit, so they may choose."

"Tell her to give us a handspan, please," Tiercel said, then turned back to the Armethaliehans. He'd thought for moonturns that he was an outsider, a stranger, someone who would be eternally confounded by the Isvaieni and their ways. But now he realized that he was looking at these people and thinking "them," not "us," seeing how awkward Eugens was in his robes—the outer sash knotted all wrong, no *chadar* at all—and he realized that he'd become more a part of the desert than he'd realized. *Great*, he thought. *Now I don't belong anywhere*. Not that it was actually going to be a problem if Ahairan had her way. "Look, you need to get dressed, then you need to choose boots, then we have to go," he said. "We lost a lot of time yesterday because of the Shamblers, and we have to get moving. I know this is all really confusing, and I'll try to explain as much as I can once we're on our way."

"Now see here, Lord Tiercel," Lord Felocan began.

"Will it help if I tell them to get moving?" Saravasse asked sweetly, poking her nose into the tent. Vianse and Mistress Oriadan squealed in fright and covered back.

"Oh for Light's sake!" Tiercel snapped. "This is Saravasse! She's Bisochim's dragon—or Bisochim's her Wildmage. Good morning, Saravasse."

"Good morning, Tiercel. Did you sleep well?" Saravasse asked, still in the same tones of honey-sweet innocence, as if she couldn't see an entire tent full of people cowering away from her in shock.

"Not really," Tiercel admitted. "I'm okay though. Where's Harrier?"

"Off terrorizing the baggage train, just as he does on any other morning. Huh. So these are Armethaliehans. Well. Not very impressive," Saravasse said dismissively.

Lord Felocan recovered first—although, Tiercel noticed, he hadn't actually reacted very much. He made an irritated noise, turning to Vianse Pallocons, who was clinging to his arm in terror. "For Light's sake, Vianse, stop behaving like a cloudwit! And get dressed! I hope they can offer us a decent meal."

"A little mutton broth," Tiercel said. "I'm sorry, but Ahairan destroyed most of our supplies. We might have more once we get to Sapthiruk."

"Ah well," Breulin said, offering up an effortful smile. "It's better than *no* mutton broth, isn't it?" He reached for the pile of garments and began to dress.

Since Eugens was already dressed, Tiercel took him outside first. It wasn't full light yet, but there was enough light for Saravasse to be plainly visible. She hadn't bothered to approach the line of tents particularly closely in order to stick her nose in to the Armethaliehans', of course, so she was standing about thirty feet from the end of the carpet now. Eugens stared at her in confused wonder until she huffed in annoyance and walked away. Daintily—all things considered—but the ground still shook.

"I never thought I'd see an actual live dragon," Eugens said. "I mean, I know they exist, but . . . they're all in the Elven Lands."

"This one isn't," Tiercel said briefly. "You should pick out some boots." He glanced around. There were a dozen pairs of desert boots neatly lined up on the carpet. All the other tents on the row had already been flattened and were being folded and packed, and in less than an hour, they'd be on their way. "Just find a pair of boots that look like they fit you," Tiercel said. "Be sure to shake them out every time you go to put them on, just in case of *jarrari*. Oh, and you need to put your *chadar* on. Where is it?"

"What? Oh, this?" Eugens produced his *chadar*, which he'd wadded up and stuffed into his sash. "I don't really—"

"You need it," Tiercel said firmly. "It's protection from the sun and the dust. We wear them all the time." He settled it on Eugens's head, wrapped and tucked it firmly, and plucked the top forward to shield Eugens's eyes. "You won't even notice it after a while." He resisted the urge to re-tie Eugens's outer sash. It wasn't going to fall off, and he could learn to do better later.

Eugens quickly picked out a set of boots, and by then the others had emerged to make their own selections. As soon as Ciniran saw that they were all out of the tent, she and several other Nalzindar went inside to pack up the bedding and the carpets.

The Armethaliehans took what Tiercel considered far too long to make their choices. Uncharitably, he suspected that Master Froilax and the Oriadans wanted to ask to see a better selection, and even though the first pair Vianse Pallocons tried on fit perfectly well, she insisted on trying on several other pairs as well. Finally everyone was shod, and Tiercel found to his dismay that he'd not only promised to *personally* find them cloaks at the evening stop, but promised to see if anyone had—or was willing to make—a comb for Mistress Pallocons's use. He did his best not to contrast their situation with his and Harrier's when the two of them had first arrived at Abi'Abadshar, because he knew that these eight people—even though Bisochim's magic had seen to it that they were *physically* whole—had suffered moonturns of a hideous ordeal. But in Abi'Abadshar, he and Harrier had taken what they were offered and thanked Shaiara for it, not started making a list of thinly-veiled demands.

Soap. Shaving razors. Mirrors. Skin lotion. Shampoo. Scissors. Writing instruments. Wine. Tea. Bread. Hats. *Hair ribbons*. Different clothing in different colors. A basin to wash in. Someone in authority to speak to. Finally—although he knew he ought to be feeling sorry for them—Tiercel got tired of their constant requests for things that just weren't here. Or weren't here right now.

"Look, I'm sorry we can't offer you a better welcome. But Ahairan has killed about three thousand of the Isvaieni—and probably more, Harrier's the one who keeps count—in the past two moonturns, and she's destroyed most of our supplies, and right now you're kind of lucky Saravasse noticed you were in the middle of the Shambler army before Bisochim destroyed it. So if you'd like to come on, we can find you *shotors*."

"Yes, of course," Magistrate Perizel said, after exchanging a speaking look with Lord Felocan. "I . . . we're just so grateful for our rescue. You can't know what it was like, day after day, being forced to march on and on under that hellish sun, watching people die all around us . . ."

Tiercel ground his teeth until his jaw ached. He hadn't quite been forced, but the rest of it had been the same. "You're safe now," he made himself say. *For the moment*.

"And I will certainly remember that you and your friends risked their lives to rescue us when I return to Armethalieh," Magistrate Perizel said. "But I really need to speak to someone in authority immediately. You have to understand that, Lord Tiercel."

After so long when he'd been just plain "Tiercel," having people use his title seemed jarring and almost insulting. He bit back a Harrier-like response—*I don't have to understand anything*—because snarling at these people wouldn't help anything. They just didn't have the facts. That was all.

"I know this is all really confusing," he said again. "And I'm sorry. You're talking about getting back to Armethalieh as if it will be fast or easy, but it won't. Harrier says we're about three moonturns away from Akazidas'Iteru here, and we really need to figure out how to resupply at Saphthruk Oasis before we go any farther. And if you want to talk to 'someone' in authority, you can talk to me. Because Harrier and Shaiara are both busy right now, and Saravasse is annoyed with you."

There was a moment of silence, then everyone started talking at once.

"Harrier's in charge?" Eugens blurted out, and Master Froilax said: "Three moonturns? It can't possibly take three moonturns to get there!" Lord Felocan turned to Eugens and demanded to know if he knew "this Harrier person," and when Eugens said that Harrier was his brother, Lord Felocan demanded that Eugens bring Harrier here at once.

He then turned back to Tiercel. "Young man, you are far too young to be in charge of anything, let alone of all this. Now do be a good boy. Run along and bring us someone in authority to talk to."

"Get off the carpet," Tiercel said. "Natha and Narkil want to roll it up. And put on your *chadars*. You'll burn if you don't. The sun's up."

"Did you hear me?" Lord Felocan demanded.

"Yeah, I actually did," Tiercel answered. "Move." He stepped back, and the Armethaliehans, glancing warily at the patiently-waiting Isvaieni, followed him.

"Don't," he said, as Eugens started to walk off. Eugens stopped. "Look," Tiercel said, trying to hold onto his fraying patience. "I *know* you've had a horrible time. The first time Shamblers attacked us it was really bad. The thing is, Ahairan's been chasing us across the desert for the last three moonturns too, and everyone here has lost husbands, wives, children, families. Don't expect a lot of sympathy. And I don't know what you think Harrier can do. We're going as fast as we can. We're going north. We rescued you, and we saved your lives. What else do you want?"

"You have a dragon," Master Froilax said. "Don't they fly? Can't it—"

"She's been hurt," Tiercel said shortly. "She can't fly."

"And why doesn't the Wildmage Heal her—if he can Heal us?" Lord Felocan said challengingly. "Then we—"

"Because Ahairan has made that impossible," Tiercel snapped. "Do you think we're *stupid*? Do you think we haven't thought of every single thing you're going to suggest?"

"Sometimes a fresh viewpoint can be helpful, Lord Tiercel," Kave Breulin said quietly.

"Yeah, I—Yeah. It's just . . . not right now, okay? Let me help you with your *chadars* and then show you how to ride a *shotor*. Then it will be time to go."

"Not without our cold mutton broth, I hope," Breulin said. "I was quite looking forward to that, Lord Tiercel."

The wry humor actually coaxed a smile from Tiercel. "It's kind of awful. But you get used to it. And, uh, I don't really use my title, you know. And my friends call me 'Tyr.'"

"'Tyr' it is then." Breulin made a short formal bow. "And since absolutely nobody calls me 'Lord Kavelin'—a secondary title the family's been trying to get rid of for years—I hope you'll call me 'Kave.' And show me what to do with something that looks like my sister's Light-day shawl."

"'Kave' it is, then," Tiercel said, returning the bow. He took the *chadar* from Kave, and looked around at all of them. "Here. This is what you have to do . . ."



IT was hard to remember now, after the hundreds of hours he'd spent riding them, how bad he'd been at riding a *shotor* at first, Tiercel thought. He found *shotors* for them, and showed them how to arrange themselves on the high wooden saddles, and how to wrap one leg around the saddle-peg and brace their knee against the high front of the saddle for added stability. He demonstrated the simple commands to make the animal get to its feet, to stop, and to kneel again so that they could dismount. He didn't bother showing them how to make a *shotor* turn left or right—or to move from a walk, to a fast pace, to a trot—the *shotors* would stay with the rest of the caravan and match its speed. Lord Felocan, Magistrate Perizel, Eugens, and Kave all practiced mounting their animals and giving them the command to rise and kneel.

Mistress Pallocons had wanted to ride double with Lord Felocan, but Tiercel said they'd both be more comfortable on their own *shotors*. Mistress Pallocons had finally agreed, clutching the front of the saddle with white-knuckled hands and looking silently terrified. Master Froilax approached his *shotor* cautiously, saying: "There, there, my good fellow," in loud hearty tones, only to leap backward with a startled cry when the animal swung its head around to regard him in bemused surprise.

"They're really very gentle," Tiercel said helplessly.

"They look vicious," Goodlady Oriadan said firmly. "I won't go near one—and Arhos, you stay away from those horrible beasts! Lord Tiercel, you'll simply have to find us something else—I won't ride one, I tell you—I won't!"

"Fine," Harrier said, striding up. "She can walk. I would've thought she'd be tired of it by now, but it's her choice."

Tiercel stared at Harrier, caught between shock at Harrier's callousness and relief that he wasn't going to have to continue to deal with the refugees all by himself, since all of the Isvaieni were politely pretending the northerners were completely invisible.

“Har, this is—”

“Goodlady Oriadan. Yeah. Cuiran told me. Magistrate Perizel, Lord Felocan, Master Froilax, G’dsir Oriadan, Gens, and . . .”

“Mistress Pallocons,” Tiercel said quickly, and Harrier nodded, obviously filing away the title for future use.

“We’ll be stopping around Noonday Bells and resting until half-past First Afternoon Bells, then going on until sometime between Evensong and First Night Bells,”

Harrier said, turning so that it was obvious that he was speaking to all eight of them. “It’s three chimes before Second Dawn Bells right now, if you want to know how long you’ll be riding today before we stop.”

“I don’t see any bell towers around here, Har,” Eugens said.

Harrier pointed at the sky, silently indicating the stars and implying the sun. “You learn,” he said. “You really ought to get on the *shotor*,” he said to Goodlady Oriadan. “It’s hard at first, but it gets easier.”

“Lord Tiercel said you’re in charge here,” Lord Felocan said, stepping away from his *shotor*. “I find that difficult to believe.”

“Well, look. I have an idea,” Harrier said blandly. “It’s going to be almost three full Bells before we stop. You’ll have plenty of time to petition the Eternal Light for understanding. If you still haven’t figured it out by the time we’ve stopped, come talk to me.”

Tiercel couldn’t help it. He laughed out loud before he could stop himself. It didn’t make matters any better.

“Do you have any idea of who I am, you Tradeborn fool?” Lord Felocan snarled.

Harrier smiled sweetly, but his eyes were murderous. “Sure. You’re the guy whose skin I saved yesterday. And while you’re calling me—and my brother—‘Tradeborn,’ just remember: our Da can buy and sell you and yours and not need to ask a loan to do it. Come on, Tyr. They’ll either figure out how to mount up and ride with us, or they’ll walk.”

Fourteen



Clash of Wills

HARRIER, LOOK—WAIT—Would you—You just can't—" Tiercel said, hurrying after his friend. "Harrier—"

Abruptly Harrier stopped, spun around, and grabbed Tiercel. He pulled him so close that their chins bumped for a moment, then spoke into his ear so softly that someone standing even a few paces away couldn't have heard. "You know that Fannas is ready to bolt. Right now the Kareggi want to throw him out, but if these people keep acting like this, they won't do that. They'll go with him. And Light knows who else will go with them. *And Ahairan will kill them.* I know they're afraid. I know they have no idea what's going on. But they have to stop acting as if they're in Armethalieh and they have to stop it *right now.*"

Tiercel froze in shock. It had never occurred to him—not for an instant—that there'd been anything more to Harrier's behavior back there than just . . . Harrier being Harrier. Not this . . . careful calculation.

"Don't threaten me," he said, pushing away. It was the first thing he could think of to say to explain what Harrier had been doing, because of course everyone had seen. He caught the quick flash of gratitude on Harrier's face, and nodded very slightly to show he understood what Harrier was telling him. It went against every instinct Tiercel had not to rush back and do everything he could to ease things for the refugees, but Harrier had reminded him of something he'd managed to forget: Nine Cities' customs were different from Isvaieni ways. He'd been edged into desert ways slowly, first by being coaxed gently out of his Armethaliehan manners in his long journey to get here, then by spending two moonturns in Tamatha'Iteru before meeting Shaiara. If Lord Felocan and Magistrate Perizel tried to force the tribes to behave like people of the Nine Cities, there would only be trouble. More trouble than they already had, and they already had a lot.

"Fine," Harrier said, still playing up. "Just . . . fine." He stalked off toward the head of the caravan—which was still loading—and Tiercel went off to find something to do that would take him far away from the Armethaliehans.

He saw Kave looking for him, and he was pretty sure that Eugens had gone looking for Harrier. Harrier would be easy to spot—even though his robes were sun-faded by now, Harrier was still the only one wearing blue—but Harrier was very good at not being found when he didn't want to be. Fortunately Tiercel'd traded out his green-and-white striped robes for some that weren't bloodstained as soon as he could, so what he wore now blended in with everyone else, but he wasn't nearly as good at hiding, so he went and found Saravasse. He didn't think any of the Armethaliehans would approach her too closely.

"It's difficult to be confronted with your old life when you aren't comfortable with your new one, isn't it?" Saravasse said, covering him with her wing.

The stub of her other—injured—wing was still covered in its dull ugly sheath of tent-felt. Tiercel didn't want to ask Bisochim how Saravasse's wing was doing. He knew what the answer would be, and forcing Bisochim to tell him would only be cruel. He knew that Bisochim removed the covering every few days to check on the damage, and to make sure that the wing wasn't growing into the bandages, but there was no medicine to give her for the pain, and jostling the wing hurt her even more. And—of course—every time Bisochim saw the damage to his Bonded, Tiercel thought he must be tempted to cast the spell of Healing that would doom them all.

If it had been Ancaladar—if, horribly, it had been Ancaladar—Tiercel knew he would not have had the courage to simply *endure*, knowing his suffering wasn't a fraction of his Bonded's. Saravasse could neither sleep, nor be Healed by her Bonded. She could only suffer—day after day—as Bisochim watched and did nothing.

It was Ahairan's cruellest taunt.

As Tiercel tried not to think of these things, Saravasse craned down to inspect him. "That was why I never went back to the Elven Lands when my Beloved had chosen a path that made my heart die a little more each day. I could have. I wonder—now—if I should have."

"I don't know," Tiercel said, leaning against her side. This early in the morning, her scales were only pleasantly warm. "There are so many things I think I should have done. Some of them I didn't do for really stupid reasons. Others, I don't know why I didn't do."

"You are younger than I," Saravasse answered, sighing gustily. "Some would say it excuses the fault."

"Not me," Tiercel answered bitterly.

"We all know what we should have done as we look backward. Yet looking backward further still, we may say that all goes as the Wild Magic wills. And we must look forward if we are to live long enough to look backward," Saravasse said.

"Harrier says we won't," Tiercel blurted out. *Harrier says we won't live. Harrier says we're all going to die.*

"*Harrier,*" Saravasse said tartly, "is quite as young as you are, Wildmage—*Knight-Mage*—or no. And the defining quality of a Knight-Mage, or so I have always heard, is stubbornness."

Tiercel reached over and patted her scales affectionately. "Then the Wild Magic definitely picked the right person to turn into a Knight Mage," he said. *I hope that's enough to save us.*



TIERCEL didn't know whether some of the Isvaieni had helped them, or whether they'd actually absorbed enough of his brief lessons, but the survivors of *The Armethaliehan Commission to Inquire into the Madiran Unrest* were all on *shotors* when the caravan left the encampment half an hour later.

Tiercel was grateful that he hadn't taught them anything about how to direct their mounts, because if he had, he was sure they'd have spent the morning's ride chasing him and Harrier around the column wanting Light knew what. (Probably for the last several moonturns not to have happened.) It was only after Harrier had dragged him away from them earlier that Tiercel had gotten a glimpse of what Harrier was worrying about, but now that he'd seen it, he couldn't stop seeing it, and it kept unfolding like those little folded sugar-paper lanterns the tea-houses sold back in Armethalieh for sweetening your tea, the ones that unfolded into the shape of a lantern while they were dissolving.

Had the Commission been sending preliminary reports back to Armethalieh? Tiercel frowned. He thought Eugens had said something about that. It was common practice, anyway. His father dealt with reports from fact-finding Commissions all the time on behalf of Chief Magistrate Vaunnel. He remembered that Eugens had said the Commission was about to leave Akazidas'Iteru, and they'd certainly have sent agents up the road ahead of them then to make sure their lodgings were prepared

and that everything and everyone was ready to receive them. When the Commission's representatives reached Armethalieh, Magistrate Vaunnel would have expected the Commissioners to be a sennight—two at most—behind them.

And they hadn't been.

Tiercel frowned, thinking. So then it would have been the middle of—Fruits? Yes. At the latest. And Magistrate Vaunnel wasn't a stupid woman. She would have sent a team of post-riders south immediately—they could make the journey over the Trade Road in less than a sennight—and dispatched a regiment of Militia to follow them. The post-riders in case there'd been a delay—or a disaster—and the Militia to deal with it. Had Chief Magistrate Vaunnel's people come all the way south? If they had, even the post-riders would have arrived at Akazidas'Iteru sennights after its inhabitants had left. He hoped some of the Commissioners could tell them what state the city had been left in. It would explain what the Militia had found—if they'd gotten that far. Maybe Ahairan had just left an empty and deserted city for them to find.

Tiercel wanted to be hopeful. He wanted to think that the Commission's disappearance meant that Chief Magistrate Vaunnel had already sent post-riders or even Wildmages to the Elven Lands to bring warning and ask for help. But he didn't. If her troops had gotten as far as Akazidas'Iteru, he didn't think Ahairan had let them leave again, but Harrier hadn't mentioned seeing Militia uniforms among the Shamblers, and Tiercel knew he'd been looking for them. That didn't really mean anything. Ahairan had a lot of different ways to kill people. And if the Militia and the post-riders had both simply vanished, Chief Magistrate Vaunnel didn't have any more actual hard evidence of trouble here in the south than the Commission'd had. He decided to talk all this out with Harrier, but when he rode down the line looking for him, he found him flanked by Ciniran and Shaiara and obviously sound asleep.

Tiercel nodded to Shaiara, indicating he didn't intend to wake him. While his speculations were nerve-wracking, they could wait. He thought Harrier could use all the sleep he could get before they stopped.



THE caravan halted when the sun was a handspan away from midheaven. Liapha was leading it today; left to her own choices, the Kadyastar *Ummara* would choose a longer midday halt but would travel farther into the night. The caravan had barely come to a stop when the Armethaliehans were making their *shotors* kneel and climbing down from their saddles. Tiercel only saw them when Magistrate Perizel, Lord Felocan, Mistress Pallocons, Kave, and Eugens all went hurrying past the head of the caravan after Harrier. He'd woken up when his *shotor* stopped and ridden out to check the area for Sandwalker burrows, and he'd been on the far side of the column from the Armethaliehans, so Tiercel's sight of them was blocked until they moved out onto the open sand.

"I have to stop them," Tiercel said, reaching for his goad.

"Huh. Why?" Thadnat asked in contempt. "Northerners can find Sandwalkers as well as Harrier can."

"Because Eugens Northerner is blood-kin to Harrier, and the northern Blue-Robes do not leave their tents as ours do!" Ciniran said in exasperation. "I will go, Tiercel."

She swung her *shotor* out of the line and clucked to it, flicking it on the shoulders with her doubled lead-rope. It began moving forward at the pacing walk that didn't look very fast at all until you had some landmarks to measure the speed by. Very quickly she'd crossed in front of the line and then moved to confront Eugens and the other three Armethaliehans, moving her hands as if she was shooing a stubborn goat back into the herd. Tiercel was too far away to hear what she said, but whatever it was, it was enough to make them turn around and head back the way they'd come. Quickly.

"So they have the beginning of wisdom," Thadnat said sneeringly.

"And would you show as much, in their land?" Kamar asked. "We have all heard Tiercel's stories of its strangeness—a place where tents are made of stone, and ice falls from the sky, and the whole land is like Abi'Abadshar, green and wet."

"How could anyone wish to live in such a place?" Thadnat said, still looking disgusted.

"Perhaps it is why they came here," Shaiara said, in a tone that silenced further discussion.

Tiercel didn't know whether to be relieved or uneasy when Harrier rode back and announced that this was a safe place to make camp. He was always glad to stop riding and to get out of the midday heat, but he didn't think today's rest break would be very restful.

He was right. In fact, they'd barely started getting the midday tents unpacked when the Armethaliehans found Harrier. He was discussing landmarks with Shaiara and Liapha: when they'd been heading directly toward Armethalieh, Harrier could guide them, but now that they were trying to find a place he'd never been to before, his peculiar Knight-Mage gift was useless. Shaiara was the best tracker in the entire caravan—Tiercel had heard it said by more than one person that a Nalzindar hunter could follow the shadow of a thought across the sand—and Liapha was one of the very oldest Isvaieni still with them. The Kadyastar were a Deep Desert tribe whose wealth had been in *gauhars*—which they'd mined at a place that Liapha would not divulge even now—and Liapha had gone to Saphthruk more times from more different places in the Isvai than anyone else. Between their skills and memories, Harrier was hoping to locate Saphthruk without having to spend too much time casting around for it, since the desert landmarks everyone knew were now useless.

As Tiercel saw the Armethaliehans approach—moving much too fast for the hammering heat, and in a tightly-packed group that made Tiercel think uncharitably of ducklings—he assumed that they'd wait for Harrier to finish his conversation with Shaiara and Liapha before asking all the questions he knew they must have.

They didn't.

"I'm sorry," Magistrate Perizel said as soon as she reached them, "I need to speak to Master Gillain now." She spoke with the quiet firmness of one used to being obeyed.

"You can mind your manners, girl, and hold your tongue until we are finished speaking with Harrier," Liapha said, barely pausing in what she'd been saying to Shaiara. "Now, as I said, marking by where the sun goes down this time of year, and I don't like to—"

"I am tired of being put off!" Magistrate Perizel snapped. She stepped even closer, and Kave put himself at her elbow just as Tiercel stepped to place himself between her and Liapha.

"Madame Magistrate—please," Tiercel said. "I appreciate your concern. Harrier really wants to speak to you"—Harrier would probably rather have eaten broken glass, if they'd had any, but Tiercel was trying to stop a fight, not start one—"but right now he and *Ummara* Shaiara and *Ummara* Liapha are trying to determine the best method to use in order to find Saphthruk Oasis. Because Ahairan destroyed everything in the Isvai, all the landmarks have shifted."

"We're lost?" Magistrate Perizel said, sounding confused and displeased.

"No," Tiercel said. "He just doesn't want to spend a lot of—ah, *more* time looking for it than he needs to."

"I see," she said, not sounding as if she did at all. "Now, this is really something I'd wanted to bring up to him, but—since you say you're in authority—I don't think we should stop at this, ah, Saphthruk Oasis at all. In my opinion, it's a much better use of our resources to head directly for Armethalieh."

"Ah . . . that's nice?" Tiercel said uncertainly.

Magistrate Perizel sighed, as if Tiercel was a very backward student who was missing the point. "Lord Tiercel, as the duly-appointed representative of the Magisterum, founded by High Magistrate Cilamen for the governance by Law and Justice of the Nine Cities and all lands which look to them for rule and care, I am

formally taking charge of this . . . whatever-it-is. If you and Harrier would like to assist me, I'll be happy to take your advice under consideration, of course, but I really can't promise that either of you will continue to have the same degree of autonomy and authority that—"

"What's a Sandwalker?" Tiercel asked, interrupting her sharply. "How do you defend an encampment against Shamblers? What are *atish 'ban-jarrari*, and what do you do if you encounter one? How do you find water here? How do you keep the livestock alive? What do you do if you're attacked by Balwarta? Or Goblins? If the Tabingana and the Kareggi are arguing, whose side do you take—and why? How do you make a *shotor* move when it doesn't want to? How long can one go without water? Without food? What are the signs that a Sandwind is coming, and what do you do? Who is Ahairan? What does she want? How do you recognize her? How do you recognize her creatures? How do you stop her? Oh. And: where are we—*exactly*?"

"Yes, yes, Lord Tiercel, you've demonstrated that you and young Master Gillain are necessary and useful," Lord Felocan drawled. "We really didn't have any intention of leaving you behind, you know."

"Leaving us behind?" Tiercel said blankly.

"You may think you have some reason to linger here in this Light-forsaken sandpit. I assure you I don't, and the Chief Magistrate . . ." for just a moment Lord Felocan's gaze unfocused ". . . will be eager to receive our report. As Helafin says, there's no reason to stop at Saphthruk at all."

"That's settled," Harrier said, walking out of a completely different conversation and into this one. He glanced at Tiercel. "What?"

"Magistrate Perizel is taking over as supreme authority in the Isvai," Tiercel said, not sure whether he was trying to keep from laughing or yelling at somebody. "She's willing to let us help."

"Oh," Harrier said, and he didn't even sound angry. He just sounded as if he couldn't imagine what he was supposed to *say*. Finally he glanced at Magistrate Perizel. "You're planning to take over leading the Isvaieni north?"

"I *am* the appropriate authority to take charge here," she pointed out.

"That's right, Har," Tiercel said seriously, nodding. "She is. The Consuls hold—*held*—warrants from the Magisterium, making them subsidiary to the Magistrates."

"Okay, yeah. But the *Ummarai* don't answer to the Consuls. Although they'd probably agree that Chief Magistrate Vaunnel was the High *Ummara* of the Nine Cities, just like Vairindiel Elvenqueen is High *Ummara* of the Elves," Harrier said meditatively.

"Oh, for the Light's sake, Har—this isn't a debate!" Eugens said. "Magistrate Perizel is a Magistrate!"

"Nobody's said she *isn't* a Magistrate, Gens," Harrier said reasonably. "She's just going to have as much luck leading the Isvaieni *anywhere* as that goat over there will have calculating tonnage capacity for a Deep Ocean Trader. Look, a couple of the tents are almost up. Everybody grab a saddle, we'll go sit in the shade, you can yell, and I can find out what happened to you."



THE first tent up—as always—was Fannas's. It was also one of the largest. When they came inside, Harrier said that they didn't need all of it, just a corner of it. Tiercel could tell that Fannas was grateful—and rightly so, since (as Tiercel had learned by now) Harrier could have claimed "Wildmage business" and thrown Fannas and his family out, and nobody would have said a word. Harrier and Tiercel had carried their own saddle-seats, and so had Eugens and Kave. Kave gave his to Magistrate Perizel, and Eugens surrendered his to Leiled Oriadan, and both of them sat on the carpet. When the others saw that their choice was between sitting on the carpet or going back out to get saddles to sit on, there was a few moments of grumbling before Mistress Pallocons and Goodsir Oriadan went out into the sun again, returning with saddles that Lord Felocan and Master Froilax promptly claimed.

After Harrier had passed three waterskins around and they'd been drained dry, he said, "I know you're all scared. Coming in here and trying to make this place into Armethalieh and these people into Armethaliehans isn't going to make things better. I'm sorry. There's a Demon out there. If she can't be stopped very soon, it's going to be worse than the Time of Kellen all over again. No one knows she's here but us. There's nobody we can tell. There's no way to get a message out. We can't kill her. Akazidas'Iteru is three moonturns travel from here. From what you say—and what I saw yesterday—it's fallen to Ahairan and everyone in it is dead."

Mistress Pallocons began to weep noisily, covering her face with her hands. Kave put an arm around her. His face looked stricken. Goodlady Oriadan reached out her hand—blindly—to her husband. He gripped it with both of his.

"I know you think Tyr and I are too young to be here and doing this," Harrier continued quietly. "So do we. We've been saying that since the beginning. But you can't do any of this for us, or instead of us, or better than we are. If you try without having all the facts, you'll just get yourselves—and maybe a lot of other people—killed."

Harrier looked calm, and he sounded calm, and Tiercel knew how much of it was fake. This was just another one of the schoolyard games Tiercel had played all his life, and they hadn't been lighthearted then, when he'd been trying to keep from getting beaten up or keep Harrier from starting another fight, and they were a thousand times grimmer now. He studied the faces of the eight people in front of him. All adults—except, maybe, for Mistress Pallocons, who looked as if she might be nearly their own age—but if none of this had happened, he would have spent six years at University then walked out into their world.

Kave looked shaken and grim. Tiercel already liked him a lot, but he couldn't trust him to go against Magistrate Perizel's orders or the Magisterium's interests. Kave had taken the same Oath of Service that she had, that Magistrate Vaunnel had, that Tiercel's father had, that Tiercel would have been expected to in order to become a Clerk Ordinary for the Magisterium.

Magistrate Perizel looked shocked and angry. No matter what Harrier said right now, or what she came to believe, or what had happened to her in Akazidas'Iteru and afterward, Tiercel didn't think today would end this fight. She had a duty to the Chief Magistrate, to the Magisterium, and to the Nine Cities, and she wouldn't set it aside just on someone's word. On *anyone's* word. Who'd want somebody in the Magisterium who would?

Master Froilax looked like someone who was trying to be angry so he wouldn't have to think about how scared he was. The Oriadans just looked terrified. The Merchant Class had been the backbone of Armethalieh all the way back to the Time of Mages: getting things done, keeping things going, baking the bread, tending the shops, making the clothes, and producing a large portion of the men and women who'd done none of those things, but had written and played the music, painted the pictures, sculpted the statues, and taught Armethalieh's next generations how to do those things and more. And without the Guild-leaders, none of that would have happened at all. Harrier's father said that an army might run on its stomach and a ship on the wind, but a city ran on meetings and bureaucracies. Especially one as large as Armethalieh. Tiercel thought the Oriadans would do what Master Froilax said, and Master Froilax would do what Magistrate Perizel said.

Eugens was the one—out of all the Commissioners Magistrate Vaunnel had sent—that Tiercel knew best. That made him hardest to figure out. Lord Rolfort had said once that all the Gillain men were kindhearted and simple and stubborn, and that Tiercel should never think that "simple" was the same thing as "stupid." Eugens had seemed the most shaken by his ordeal . . . but he'd also awakened first. Now his emotions seemed to be a mixture of anger at the appalling way—so he saw it—that Harrier was behaving, relief at finding him alive, disbelief at finding him so changed . . . and panic at the thought of having to think about Akazidas'Iteru again.

Lord Felocan was another matter. Lord Felocan was trouble, and since Tiercel knew that Harrier thought they were *all* trouble, he wasn't sure Harrier would see it. But the Nobles had been in Armethalieh since before there'd been Magistrates at all, and even though a thousand years had passed since the days of Cilamen First Magistrate, you could *still* hear some of the Noble families complain that there was no reason for them to obey the Magistrates when by rights they should, at the very

least, be equal to them. Tiercel thought that Lord Felocan had come south for his own reasons, not—even though he'd been a member of the Commission—to serve the Magisterium, or not entirely. He thought that of all of them, Lord Felocan had been the least frightened by the disaster. And that if Magistrate Perizel didn't intend to make things happen here the way Lord Felocan wanted them to, he'd do it himself.

"Then perhaps you won't waste any more time, Master Gillain, and give me the facts," Magister Perizel said calmly. "After what . . ." She stopped and took a deep breath. "You say that one of the Endarkened has returned. After what all of us have seen, I'm not going to deny it. I believe you."

"I wish it *were* one of the Endarkened," Harrier said. "We'd know what it would take to kill her if it was. Ahairan is an Elemental Spirit of Darkness. Her offspring will be creatures much closer to the Endarkened from the Time of Mages. Look. She usually attacks us a couple of times a day, and she hasn't hit us yet today, so what I need right now is everything you can tell me about what happened at Akazidas'Iteru, and how you got here. If you saw something we haven't seen yet, we need that information."

There was a moment of silence. No one spoke.

"Please, Gens," Harrier said.

"There were more of us at first," Kave said in a low trembling voice.

"Kave, no," Magistrate Perizel said, quickly, leaning forward and reaching down to place a hand on his shoulder. He reached up to cover it with his own. His other arm was still around Mistress Pallocons's shoulders.

"No, Madame—Helafin. They . . . Harrier says they need to know. I need to know . . . If I can tell someone."

Magistrate Perizel nodded, sitting back and biting her lower lip.

"We were making ready to leave in three days," Kave said. "Our messengers would be departing in the morning, once the city gates opened. The sky was still light—it was, I should judge, about three chimes before First Night Bells—an hour past what they call, here in the south, the First Hour of Night. I was making sure all the documents were properly packed and sealed for our return journey, and sealing the preliminary report. I'd just finished transcribing it . . ." He stopped, and stared off into space for a moment. No one spoke. "Abail Travise—my assistant—came to my office, and said that Madame Magistrate wanted me. She brought me to the roof of the Consul's Palace. You can overlook the whole city. You could . . ." He took a deep breath, and when he spoke again his voice was quicker, more determined, as if he meant to tell the tale and tell all of it. "Consul Tacanin and some of his advisors were there with her. I could see that the walls were filled with City Watch. The desert beyond was covered with people. Thousands of them, just standing there, silently. The Consul said that the Captain of the Watch said they'd simply appeared.

"At first we all thought he'd been drinking, not to have seen them approach. And we thought these must be the brigands the refugees had talked about. It was too dark to see them clearly. All we could see was that they were naked. After Captain Micabe ordered them—at the Consul's orders—to disperse, and they did nothing, no matter how many times he said it, Lord Felocan suggested tossing down some torches. By now they were right below the walls."

"It wasn't my fault," Lord Felocan said irritably. "How was I to know?"

"No one is blaming you for any of this, my lord," Magistrate Perizel said quietly.

"By then we'd all gone to the wall over the Main Gate for a better view. The Watch tossed the torches down and . . . the people burned. They burned like dry wood, and the fire caught, and spread. In the light, we could see that they were all . . . they couldn't be alive. They were dead. They'd been dead for moonturns. No one knew what to do—we'd seen them walk up to the walls, and they were just standing there, burning. Consul Tacanin ordered water to be brought to pour on them, we just couldn't . . . That was when we heard the Watch blowing horns on the other side of the city. Later I spoke to a local woman—Taudini—she'd been close enough to see—she said that a swarm of insects just ate their way through the gates, devouring them until not a scrap of wood was left."

Harrier glanced toward Tiercel in puzzlement.

"Sounds like *atish'ban-tiehaans*," Tiercel said, frowning slightly. "They—the real *tiehaans*—chew up wood, trees, books, paper, leather—and then puke it up again and make nests out of the mud."

Harrier nodded. His expression plainly said: *nothing for us to worry too much about, then.*

"Those things, the—you called them 'Shamblers'—could walk right in to the city now. And they did. The ones on our side started walking along the wall, away from the Main Gate—even the ones that were still burning. All we knew at the time was that we'd heard the alarm. We didn't know what had happened. Consul Tacanin said we should get back to the Palace, and on our way there, a messenger reached us and said the gates had been opened and the enemy had entered the city. You have to understand," Kave said plaintively. "We didn't know what they were. And the city was full of refugees. They were even sleeping in the plaza in front of the Consular Palace, because they had no place else to go. The Consul offered us horses if we wanted to leave at once. He was going to send his own family. Magistrate Perizel—all of us—we agreed—we agreed to try."

"Yes," Master Froilax said. "It was all of us. We all agreed." He glared at Tiercel and Harrier, as if they might doubt his word, or Kave's.

"The only gate that was—would have been—passable was the Main Gate," Kave said, resuming his narrative. "The streets leading to the others were too narrow for horses and riders, and the Shamblers were coming through them. We were mounted, waiting, but when the Watch went to open the gates, they pulled on the counterweight chains and insects showered down on them. They screamed and fell down and the insects just kept coming. Our horses began to panic. We abandoned them and ran back to the Palace. I was the last one inside. The stones of the Plaza were covered with a moving black tide—alive, but you couldn't see where one part of it ended and the next began . . .

"Everyone outside—in the Plaza—died. Everyone who tried to cross it that night died. The Palace Guard poured oil on the steps and guarded the entrance with torches, but they waited to set the steps alight, because there wasn't enough oil in the Palace for them to do it more than two or three times. The horses' bodies were eaten down to bones. We could see them from one of the upper windows."

His voice was barely a whisper, but there was complete silence inside the tent.

"By morning the city was quiet, and there was no sign of the insects. Consul Tacanin said we had to try to escape. We went up to the roof. The city was still surrounded by the . . . Shamblers. All the City Watch were standing with them. Some of the people, too. Because of that, we didn't think there were any of them inside. We never did see any. We thought that—with enough of us—we could fight our way through them. We went to the stables, and all the horses, the mules, even the *shotors* were either gone or dead. For the next two days we didn't see a single live animal, anywhere in the city. We never saw any dead people." He stopped, as if he didn't know how to go on.

"You spent two more days there?" Tiercel asked, when the silence had stretched nearly to breaking point.

Kave nodded. "Yes. There were still several thousand survivors in the city—in the Light Temples, the Guild Houses—anywhere large enough for a few dozen or a few hundred people to huddle together. Consul Tacanin gathered them in the Plaza and we started making plans to go north on foot. Supplies. Water. Medicines. The Shamblers didn't come back into the city. We kept watch. That first day, some people went up onto the walls, and . . . they saw people they knew outside, I think. They went out to them. When they got close, the Shamblers killed them. We tried to stop anyone from going out at first. All of us did. After a while we gave up. We gave up."

"They'd all be dead now anyway," Lord Felocan said roughly.

"I know," Kave said. "I know. I know. But—"

"Be quiet, boy," Lord Felocan said. "That first night, we crammed as many people into the Consul's Palace as possible. Priceless antiques and civilization hardly mattered in the face of the abominations we'd all seen. The rest of them were in the Light Palace across the Plaza, but I hardly think the Eternal Light would mind. It wasn't restful, but we managed. By the end of the second day, we were as prepared as we could be—most of the Tradeborn had those pushcarts, or baskets, or somelike, and those of us who could use them had swords. Everyone carried water—yes, even *I* was reduced to the level of a miner's dray horse. We waited for dawn, and headed for the Eastern Gate. No one wanted to risk trying to open the Main Gates again. It didn't work," he said, meeting Harrier's gaze defiantly. "Oh, the things let us walk out through the gate. Took us a while, too, and they kept backing up, and all the while we were thinking they might back up all the way to Armethalieh. And when the last of us were out of the gate, more of them came walking through it behind us—been in the city the whole time watching us go—and lined up along the wall like the Militia on parade. We could all have cut our throats right there, but then *we* would have missed the opportunity to enjoy your so-charming company, now, wouldn't we?"

There were a few moments of silence. Tiercel could imagine the scene too clearly: the early-morning cool, the ranks of withered brown corpses, and—here and there among them—the bodies of those who'd died in the previous three days, standing bloodless and untenanted, controlled by Ahairan. And—just when the survivors of Akazidas' Iteru had been preparing for the fight that would gain them freedom, more Shamblers appearing, surrounding them, closing the trap.

"Abail screamed," Kave said softly. "She . . . screamed. I knew she was betrothed. Magistrate Vaunel was supposed to witness the marriage. It was set for the thirty-fifth of Harvest. She'd been asking me ever since this had started if I was sure we'd be back in time. I'd always said I was sure we would be. I shouldn't have lied. She ran at the Shamblers in front of us. And they killed her. She fell down. And . . . then . . . she . . . got . . . up."

"Kave—" Tiercel said helplessly, but Kave wasn't listening.

"They killed—I don't know, a hundred?—of us before we realized that we had to stay away from them when they approached us. They started herding us like sheep. And they started walking. And we started walking. There were thousands of us, you know, at first. We tried to help each other. That first day. That first sennight. Share food. Share water. Share blankets. But the days were so hot. And they didn't stop. They walked so slowly, but they didn't stop. And if you fell far enough behind, you'd touch one of them. And it would kill you.

"After a few days, I think it was, they started to stop now and then. Oh, oh, oh, oh *Light*, I saw . . . I saw women carrying children fall down, and nobody helped them, nobody helped their children, nobody picked up the babies, I couldn't get to them, we left them behind . . ." Kave began to cry, helplessly, gulping painful sobs, staring at them as if he didn't realize he was crying, until finally he put his hands over his face and bent down over his knees. Mistress Pallocons stared at him, horrified, her face blotched and streaked with tears, until Lord Felocan put a hand on the back of her neck and she turned and pressed her face against his thigh.

"Is that what you wanted to know?" Eugens said furiously. "Was it helpful? Was it *fun*?"

"You don't ever get to ask me that, Gens. Not you. Not ever," Harrier said in a flat voice. "Just tell me how the eight of you survived a pleasant thousand-mile walk without food or water with a bunch of Shamblers for an escort."

"We stole from the dead, what do you think?" Lord Felocan snarled. "From the dying. From the living, if we could get away with it and if they didn't look like they had much time. About a thousand people died in the first sennight, and I figured that if I didn't want to join them, I'd need to put aside all my pleasant scruples and survive. You may thank me for your brother's life at your leisure."

"You can thank me for yours any time you want," Harrier answered icily. "I'm the one who told the Isvaieni you weren't some new trap of Ahairan's."

Eugens shook his head as if flies were buzzing around it. "Now—Now look here, Har. It's bad enough that Tyr"—he stopped, looking angry and momentarily wary, then plunged onward—"that Tyr's gone sick in the head raving about being Kellen Come Again like a Flowering Fair Mock-Mage. Do you have to follow him?"

Harrier smiled, and it wasn't a happy expression at all. "Actually, Gens," he said, and his voice was deceptively, frighteningly, soft, "Kellen Tavadon was a Knight-Mage. A Wildmage. Cilarn First Magistrate was a High Mage. Tyr is a High Mage, too. If you want to complain about somebody thinking they're Kellen Come Again, complain about me." He spread his hands a little way apart, and a ball of Coldfire began to grow between them. It didn't glow very brightly in daylight, but it didn't have to: everyone could see it. "If you get home again, congratulate Brelt for me, Gens. I'm not coming back to become Harbormaster after Da. I've got the Three Books."

Eugens gaped at him and then simply sputtered, trying to force out words that he couldn't manage.

"If? What do you mean—if?" Master Froilax demanded. "Look, you—Wildmage—You—You really have to see that Magistrate Perizel . . ." he stared at the globe of Coldfire.

Harrier shrugged and let the glowing ball of Coldfire drift up toward the ceiling. "*If*," he repeated mercilessly. "I told you it's three moonturns just to get to the foot of the Trade Road from here. And I'm guessing, because the Isvaieni don't bother with maps. Ahairan attacks us all the time, and people die—an *atish 'ban-jarrari* is half the size of your hand, and if it stings you, you're dead, that's all. The Isvai is full of her creatures, and even by itself it's deadly. There's no water here except what Bisochim can Call. The only reason he can do that is because he's Bonded to Saravasse. We're running low on food—which is why we're going to stop at Saphthruk, no matter what you think we should do. Madame Magistrate," Harrier said, now speaking directly to her, "with all due respect, the *Ummarai* take my advice because I'm a Wildmage. You don't know their customs. You don't know the desert. Tyr and I have been trying to find Ahairan and stop her for over a year. Just . . . we'll do our best, okay?"

"I don't believe this," Eugens said. "I don't believe it."

"I know," Harrier said. "Tyr told me, and I didn't believe him. Kareta brought me the Three Books, and I didn't believe her. Just . . . I think our tent's up now. Let's give *Ummara* Fannas and his people back their tent, and you can come and lie down for a while. You'll feel better. Bring your saddles. You'll want them later." He got to his feet, shaking out his robes absently as he stood, and adjusting his sword-harness. The others got slowly to their feet. Neither Lord Felocan or Magistrate Perizel made a move to pick up the saddles they'd been using as seats. "I meant it," Harrier said quietly. "Nobody has servants here. It's not an Isvaieni custom."

"So you're expecting us to go native, are you?" Lord Felocan asked, and Tiercel couldn't quite tell whether the tone of his voice meant incredulity or exhaustion or simply that he was furious.

"Yes," Harrier said simply. "Something you may not know—I didn't—is that the Isvaieni have *no* custom of charity. Water is free to anyone who asks. Food and shelter and transportation aren't. I've persuaded them to treat you as if you're Isvaieni. Thirty-one people died rescuing you from the Shamblers, so we have the resources available. But you'd better do your best to fit in. Now come on."

Tiercel couldn't decide whether he was just as horrified as the new arrivals were by Harrier's behavior—Harrier had to know how it would look to them—or whether he agreed with Harrier that it was something that had to be done for the reasons he'd just told them, no matter how brutal and arrogant it must seem. It suddenly occurred to him that as soon as he'd recognized Magistrate Perizel, a tiny part of him had been hoping that when she woke up, she'd have answers, solutions, that she could do this so he and Harrier wouldn't have to do it anymore. She was a *Magistrate*, one of the people who judged and considered and ruled over Armethalieh, the Nine Cities, the lands that the Nine Cities governed, one of the people he'd been raised all his life to respect. An interpreter of the law, fair-minded and educated and just.

And she couldn't. All of this—what Ahairan had already done, what she was going to do—was outside the scope of anything the Magisterium could possibly deal with. Magistrate Perizel's judicial authority, Lord Felocan's hereditary privilege—neither one *mattered* here, and Tiercel didn't think Harrier had even thought about that as much as he was acting on instinct and pure stubbornness without understanding quite why.

Acting like a Knight-Mage.

Tiercel shuddered faintly, and wondered for the first time if there might be a reason beyond their own convenience why the Wildmages of the North kept themselves so completely hidden. In the Isvai, the tribes depended on the Wildmages for their lives (*had* depended on them, before Bisochim had killed all of them, and if he hadn't, Ahairan would probably already have what she needed, and Tiercel was certain Harrier had realized sennights ago that Bisochim had been serving the Wild Magic even while he'd been summoning up the Dark) and because of that, the Isvaieni accepted everything the Wildmages did. In the Isvai, a Wildmage's ruthless devotion to the will of the Wild Magic wouldn't be any more ruthless than the desert itself. In the north . . .

I am not going to think about that, Tiercel told himself firmly. *Not here. Not now.*

The others had all shuffled off after Harrier—Lord Felocan and Magister Perizel and Master Froilax resentfully carrying saddles—but Kave was still sitting on the carpet. “Are you all right?” Tiercel asked.

After a moment Kave hauled an end of his *chadar* loose to mop his face and scrub at his nose, then looked up. “Please don't judge any of us too harshly. You can't imagine . . .”

“I know,” Tiercel said with weary sympathy. “I can't imagine what it was like for you. But you can't imagine what any of us have experienced, either. Things happen. Horrible things. And afterward, what you feel most of all is frustration that you're still alive.”

“Can't . . . Can't someone stop her, it, Ahairan?” Kave asked. He pulled himself painfully to his feet. “The Endarkened were defeated.”

Tiercel felt too much sympathy to laugh, and he was too tired to, anyway. “We hope someone can. Wildmage spells can't. Bisochim tried. We'll hope the Elves can think of something.” *They did. They sent me. They sent Ancaladar.*

“Well shouldn't we . . . send a messenger to the Veiled Lands?” Kave asked hesitantly.

“The Veiled Lands are even farther away than Armethalieh is, and nobody but a Wildmage could get through Pelashia's Veil,” Tiercel said. “Come on. You need to lie down. It's hot, and everyone's always really tired after they've been Healed.”



WHEN the two northerners, Tiercel and Harrier, had first arrived at Abi'Abadshar, she had thought they were a danger. It hurt Shaiara's heart now to look back on the brief moonturns she had spent there and see them as an interlude of comfort and safety, when at the time it had seemed—to her and to all the Nalzindar—to be a time of constant fear, and a life lacking in so many things they had once had.

But one did not see the day for what it was even when one stood in the midst of it. The danger the two northerners had brought with them was not one of discovery, but of something far worse.

Knowledge.

Possessed of the knowledge that Tiercel and Harrier brought with them, how could she turn aside from aiding them? And one act led to the next, and the next, as one grain of sand upon the wind was joined by another and another, until the deadly Sandwind blew, destroying all that lay in its path. Had she turned her back upon them and upon the Star-Crowned on that first day, perhaps the Nalzindar might even now be safe within Abi'Abadshar. Perhaps the Star-Crowned would not have been lost. Perhaps the Demon would now be slain. Perhaps all would be better. Perhaps it would be worse. Darak-her-father had said always that “perhaps” was a net thrown to trap the caster and not the prey. Shaiara could not contemplate “perhaps.” She could only set the nets of her thoughts against what was, and what she must work against.

Praise was a thing rarely spoken among the desertfolk, and by the Nalzindar least of all. Praise was sweet as date-honey, and, once dripped into the ears, the hearing of it could make a man, a woman, a child, abandon all things to gain more. How then did praise make a better hunter or maker of tools? So she had praised neither Tiercel nor Harrier as they had done what no man of the Isvaieni could have done as well. Endlessly each of them had eaten the bread of rebuke and insult, accepted the lessons she and others sought to teach them of the ways of the Isvaieni, and even sought to learn more. And set beside this learning, each had fought always, in his own way, to win a battle that could not be won. It was not the battle to slay Ahairan—that had been a thing that could not have been won even before they four set foot upon the Dove Road that would take them to Telinchechitl. It was the battle to survive, to help the Isvaieni to survive, to bring about a day upon which Ahairan *could* be slain, though theirs would not be the hands that wielded the knife. She had watched, day by day, as Harrier had surrendered all of his hopes but that last, and had fought as viciously as any cornered *pakh* to keep the rest of them from knowing this truth until he must. It was upon Harrier's strength that all of them, though he knew it not, depended now. Even Bisochim. Even Saravasse. Even Fannas, for all his bluster and pride.

It was for that reason that fear pierced Shaiara's heart now, like a thorn of ice.

An *Ummara* must care for all and care for none, and so Harrier had been to all of them. His friendships and affections—his hatreds and grudges—had always been so open, so obvious to all, that none took them seriously, and indeed, he had treated Liapha and Sathan no differently one from the other, though all knew that Liapha coddled him as if he were the child who had never left her tents and Sathan had wished that Harrier did not wear the Blue Robes, that he might challenge him within the honor-circle. And indeed, Shaiara was nearly certain that if Sathan had done so, Harrier would have accepted, Blue Robes or no, yet he had left Sathan his honor even to his death. That this was so made all possible: the strange things Harrier asked of them, the terrible privations that Ahairan forced upon them. He had not been among them even one turn of the year, nor might any of them live to see the turn of another, but were it otherwise, with time Harrier might have learned their ways as fully as one who had been born within tents. To think so made Shaiara's heart rejoice, and did no harm.

But now northerners—many northerners—had come, and one was of his own blood kin. This was bad enough, for it showed the people a thing they had not seen before, that Harrier Wildmage had not set aside the bonds of clan and line to take up the Three Books. Worse yet was the thought Shaiara held so close she had not even spoken of it to Ciniran or Kamar: that these kin and Elders of his far-off northern tribe would speak their words into Harrier's ears, and deafen him to the words to which he had listened for so long.

It would not be a bad thing, Shaiara told herself, if only the northerner words held wisdom, but they did not. They were like the yapping of the *pakh* as it tried to drive the desert lion from its prey. From the moment the northerners had roused from the Healing Trance, they had done nothing but whine and cry and shout and make demands—for food, for clothing, for such luxuries as even *Ummara* Fannas in his greed could not imagine—and when they were not doing that, they were flinging themselves recklessly into danger, or thrusting themselves into the midst of the councils of the *Ummarai*, as if their questions were of more importance than the need to find the way to Sapthirik Oasis. Their words held all the fear and foolishness of city-dwellers, of children, of those who claimed importance and pride of place merely because they wished it so, and would have their ways be the ways of all places.

Shaiara knew not how to deal with such a matter, for this was a point upon which Darak's counsel was silent. The Isvaieni could not lay the northerners' bones upon the sand—it would be to make of them an offering to Ahairan. And to do such a thing merely because they were trouble—Shaiara knew well—would mark a trail down

which the Isvaieni must not walk, for who next would be too much trouble to ride onward with? Fannas with his constant complaints? Or would it be Zin, who must be helped to mount a *shotor* because he had no legs? Mark that trail, and one must ride it to the end. Instead, she must hope that Sand and Star would grant them all three things: to Harrier, wisdom; to the northerners, as much wisdom—and to herself, the forbearance to take them into the tents of the Nazindar, for she was certain that no one else would. For now, she would counsel herself to see good fortune in the fact that the weariness that followed a Healing, combined with the heat of the day and the unfamiliar exercise, meant that once Harrier had conducted them to her tent, they were too tired to continue to complain, and simply lay down upon their mats and slept.

When it came time to break camp, the northerners still slept heavily. Shaiara thought carefully, then said to her people not to strike the tent until the last moment so that the northerners might sleep as long as possible. She would do as much for any of their own wounded. Next, she went to help with the hundred small tasks that needed to be done before they could all be on their way once more, and then to bring the *shotors* that they would need to carry the tent and carpets to the tent.

“I don’t like this,” Harrier said, coming up to her and taking the lead-rope of one of the *shotors* from her hand. “Nothing from Ahairan since those *atish’ban-barghusi* yesterday morning. I don’t really count the Shambler army,” he added.

Shaiara frowned. “How not?” she asked, walking beside him toward their tent.

Harrier hesitated. “It’s not that I don’t think they would have killed us all if they could have. But you saw how easy it was for us to get away. I think they were just going somewhere and we happened to be there. I think Ahairan kept so many of the people alive in the beginning so that she’d have a supply of . . . durable ones. Kave and the others said that when the Shamblers came to Akazidas’Iteru at first, they were the kind that Ahairan called up out of the other *Iteru*-cities, but there weren’t any of those still with them when they reached us. I don’t know. Maybe they . . .” He laughed quietly in horror at his own words. “Maybe they just *fell apart* from walking so far.”

“Perhaps they did,” Shaiara agreed soberly. “A dry twig will snap if it is bent time and again. And so if these Shamblers did not mean to attack us yesterday, it would not have been many days before they did.”

“They can’t do it now,” Harrier said conclusively. “And that worries me. If Tyr is right about Ahairan being young and stupid, that has to mean she isn’t very imaginative. We haven’t seen Goblins lately, and I think that’s because she’s been keeping them away. They’ll eat anything, and that means they’d eat Shamblers as easily as they’d eat us. So she’s either going to try to make more Shamblers—and we’re the only source of Shamblers unless Vaunnel’s actually gotten worried enough to march a whole army down the Trade Road for her to bespell—or she’s going to bring back the Goblins. I don’t know which worries me more.”

“I would rather fight Shamblers than Goblins,” Shaiara said feelingly. The Isvaieni had only faced the creatures once. Once had been enough. “Do you think the *Ummara* of Armethalich has sent an army?” she asked.

Harrier shook his head reluctantly. “No. But she’s raised at least some of the Nine Cities’ levies, I think. She might even have sent a troop of Militia south. They would have sent couriers back with reports along the way, and those would have stopped at some point. With the information she has, she’ll have set patrols on the northern Trade Road. An observation post on the Armen Plains. Nothing more.”

The two of them reached the front of the tent. Three Nazindar—Thadnat, Natha, and Narkil—were standing outside, waiting to strike the tent and Shaiara could see Larasan standing inside. The northerners were already on their feet, and Shaiara was about to tell the others that they could begin the preparations to take down the tent when she heard Larasan’s voice raised in anger.

“Foolish dog of a northerner! Give me that!”

Shaiara hurried inside, and she was just behind Harrier as the two of them entered. Larasan stood facing the northerners, an empty waterskin in her hands. The old one—Felocan—stood facing her, his face twisted in anger. He held his *chadar* in his hands.

It dripped with water.

“Don’t you squall at me, girl. If I want a wet rag against the heat, what business is it of yours?”

“It’s her business because you’re wasting water. In the *desert*.” Harrier snatched the *chadar* out of Felocan’s hands. Shaiara looked at the others. Three of them—Eugens included—had damp *chadars* on their heads. “You don’t get to do that,” she heard Harrier say. “Water is for drinking. Nothing else.”

“But . . . how are we supposed to bathe?” Perizel said blankly.

“You don’t,” Harrier said. He walked outside with the dripping *chadar*. Shaiara followed, wondering what he would do with it. To waste water after lecturing the northerners against it would be wrong, but surely it would be just as wrong to let Felocan benefit from his wickedness. “Don’t leave any waterskins where any of them can get at them,” she heard Harrier tell Larasan.

“Never again,” she answered, her eyes glittering with anger. “They are animals! Truly, Harrier.”

“In the north, there’s so much water you can drown—smother—in it,” Harrier told her gently. He tilted back his head and wrung the *chadar* out into it. He wiped the damp cloth over his face and hands, and then shook it out and held it by one edge into the hot breeze of the afternoon. Shaiara smoothed the smile from her face. An elegant solution.

“What are you doing?” Felocan demanded, striding toward him. The others had all followed Felocan out of the tent, so Shaiara began helping Thadnat, Natha, and Narkil to take it down. She kept a wary eye upon the northerners as she did. It was not difficult; they did not seem to see her at all. She found that puzzling, for neither Harrier nor Tiercel had ever pretended that she did not exist.

“Drying your *chadar* for you,” Harrier said. She saw him hold it out to Lord Felocan. “Put it on. You don’t want to be out here in the sun without protection.”

“You puffed-up, arrogant . . . You told us that water was *free*!” Felocan sputtered in fury.

“I said that it was freely-given,” Harrier said. “This is a desert. There are six thousand nine hundred people in this camp, including the eight of you. There are nine thousand, two hundred, and eighty-four *shotors*, thirty-five *ikulas* hounds, Saravasse, and I’m not actually keeping an accurate count of the goats and sheep. Every single one of those people, *shotors*, hounds, goats, sheep, and Saravasse needs water. *You* do not need to be comfortable.”

Felocan snatched the *chadar* out of Harrier’s hands with a wordless growl and stalked away. Shaiara straightened from her task to watch him go, hands on hips, not bothering to conceal her pleasure. But her contentment was short-lived, for now Eugens approached Harrier, his every gesture speaking of anger. “Oh, for Light’s sake, Harrier, what do you think you’re doing? Grow up, will you? He didn’t mean any harm. And he’s—”

“Gens, if you tell me that he, or any of you, have ‘suffered so much,’ I swear in the name of the Eternal Light I will leave you all right here,” Harrier said, turning to face his brother and taking a long step forward. “You’re alive. The people here? Are *all* the Isvaieni left—except for a few kids that we’re all hoping are hidden too well for Ahairan to find. We started out from Telinchechitl about the same time you started out from Akazidas’Iteru with around eleven thousand people. And this time last year, I’d guess there were around eighteen thousand Isvaieni, if you counted all the people in all the tribes. And the four thousand one hundred and eight people who’ve died in the last three moonturns? I watched most of them die, Gens. I tried to save their lives. And right now I’m trying to save yours. So why don’t you shut up and let me do my job?”

What came next was so swift that had she not been standing to watch, Shaiara would not have seen it. Eugens roared with anger, and swung a great fist at Harrier’s head. Harrier moved to the side, and Eugens sprawled full-length upon the sand.

“Get up,” she heard Harrier say. “I won’t fight you. Get up, and find Lord Felocan, and tell him he needs to come back here and get his saddle. When the tent is

packed, we can leave.”



WHEN they rode out, the northerners did not ride together. The woman Perizel rode beside Liapha, both of them speaking together as if they had known one another many moonturns. Kave stayed beside Tiercel, and the silence they shared was filled with as many words as another’s speaking.

Felocan and his cold-eyed slave-woman rode in silence, as far behind the Nazzindar as they could. It would have been well and more than well did Froilax and the two who both named themselves Oriadan ride before him, but they did not. Shaiara did, and felt Felocan’s eyes upon her back like the promise of an arrow, though she would not stoop to looking behind her to see his face.

So far distant that he rode among the Adanate and not the Nazzindar rode the brother of Harrier, filled with such brooding anger as Shaiara had heard of only rarely among the Isvaieni, and her heart was uneasy to know of it. And though upon an ordinary day Harrier would ride among the Nazzindar, or at the head of the caravan, today he rode with the Lanzanur, at the side of Zanattar, and Shaiara knew not what to think of this. And so, upon the hours of their journey, Shaiara turned over in her mind all the teaching-tales she had heard since she was a small child, to see if she could find some useful wisdom there.

At the Gatherings of the Tribes each year the Isvaieni would come together to trade with one another, to make betrothals and marriages, to pay debts, to settle blood-feuds, and to hear not only the recitations of *The Book of the Light*, but the songs of the great tale-singers. The greatest tales were those which taught while they amused, like *The Song of Marasin*, in which a hunter of the Zariban too lazy to properly mend her tools thinks she has caught a great many *sheshu* in a night’s hunt, only to find when she returns to her mother’s tent that she had a hole in her game bag and she has only caught the same *sheshu* over and over and over—or *The Song of Baruthur*, the tale of another of the Zariban (there had never been such a tribe, back to the beginning of days), who did so great a favor for a Wildmage that the Wildmage granted Baruthur a luck so powerful that he gained all he thought to wish for, no matter what it might be. Soon wish piled upon wish, and Baruthur went from being a happy shepherd with a fine family to a miserable city-dweller hemmed in by costly possessions and living in fear.

It was not long since Shaiara’s heart had been uneasy to think that Harrier would follow the persuasions of the northerners or of his brother, yet today he had proven he would not. Yet having been given what her heart desired, it seemed as if it would have been far better—for her and for all—had she not received it. *Anger in the heart is a jarrari in the tent* was a saying her father had rebuked her with many times when Shaiara was a child, and it was a bitter truth that they could afford to welcome no *jarrari* into their tents, either of Ahairan’s devising or their own. It was almost as if she saw the black line of a Sandwind upon the horizon: distant, implacable, disastrous—and unavoidable. And the difference was that one knew precisely what ruin the Sandwind would bring when it struck, and Shaiara only knew that they carried ruin with them, as inevitable as the Sandwind itself.



THE beginning of their great trouble was almost serene. When they stopped to make Night Camp, Liapha offered to take the three northern women into the Kadyastar tents, so that a comb might be found for Pallocons’s hair and it could be combed through—if it *could* be combed through—and braided properly. Shaiara expected no offer of assistance in the evening’s tasks from any of the northern men, and in this she was not disappointed, though the preparation of Night Camp was a busy time and there was work that even an untutored northerner could do. There was occupation for many inexpert hands to be found merely in unloading the packs of the *shotors*, and—once the tents had been set—arranging all their contents, and that was only the beginning of the evening’s tasks. But she could not spend overmuch time in worrying over it, beyond telling Kamar to remain close beside the tent to keep watch, lest the northerners be as reckless in their handling of the possessions of others as they were in their misuse of water.

Once the tents were set it was the task of all not busy elsewhere to make certain that all the camp’s waterskins and jars were filled—the nightspring was the first thing Bisochim Called, for just that reason—before Bisochim returned from ensuring that the evening’s Sandwind had properly run its course. Then would he release the sheep, the goats, and the *shotors* from the bespelling he had set upon them even before he had Called the nightspring, for had he not commanded them to stillness, the beasts would have muddied the spring with their hooves before clean water could be drawn from it. Then came the time of jostling chaos as the animals rushed to drink—and must be kept from plunging *into* the nightspring, the work of many hands—and after that, the time of planting the open space around it with the rootlings they had carried packed in wet sand from their last camp.

As always, Bisochim stood watch over the unnatural meadow, causing grass and vine to sprout so quickly that its growth could actually be witnessed. As vital as this was for their survival, seeing it come about always made Shaiara uneasy. Even as Bisochim was engaged in that task, the sky above the encampment slowly brightened with globes of glowing mist. Equally vital, and equally unnatural. Shaiara’s heart would have yearned for honest night, save that she feared what that darkness now so often concealed.

At last, after all these tasks were complete, the encampment settled into the quiet of the evening. If Shaiara had been helping with the livestock, she would savor the quiet walk back to her own tent, and if the evening meal was little more than hot salt water, and the Nazzindar—never a numerous tribe—could now be numbered upon her fingers, she could still say to herself that another day lived was another day of defiance to the Shadow.

So many generations gone that a story-singer might chant them from noon to noon and not speak them all in a moonturn—did the ancient names yet survive—the ancestors of Shaiara’s people had stood against the Shadow when the Shadow harried no others. The most ancient of their songs, *The Song of Atroist*, began: *Once did the Isvaieni live in a desert of cold, a desert of stone, a desert beneath a cold bright sky. Look, children, to the north. Look, children, to the west. Look, children, to the sky, for from the sky comes Death and Shadow on great dark wings.* It was enough, if she must die, to die defying the Shadow as her far-distant ancestors had.

This night, however, the return to her own tent did not bring peace. Tiercel was seated upon the carpet before the second tent, speaking quietly and earnestly to Kave and Eugens. Harrier was standing several *trayas* from the end of Shaiara’s carpet, staring out at the desert as if he wished something to appear so that he might slay it. Neither Felocan nor Perizel was anywhere to be seen, but Froilax, Pallocons, and the two Oriadans were inside the second tent. Shaiara knew this, because they spoke in the same loud voices that Harrier and Tiercel had used in the very beginning, and so Shaiara—and people for tents around—could hear every word.

“How can they possibly expect us to survive with nothing more than a mug of broth?” the female Oriadan said. “They have sheep—and goats! Herds of them! Arhos, you have to explain to them that expecting anyone to ride for hours with nothing more than some cold soup is cruel and heartless! I’m sure *they* don’t!”

“I don’t think—” the male Oriadan said.

“That’s right, Arhie. *Don’t* think. Leave the thinking to Benke Froilax, just as your sister always does. Good woman, Handene, Light deliver her, and all praise that she’s home and safe,” Froilax said. “Now, Leiled has a good thought. Never you mind what these friends of that brother of Master Gillain are putting on for show. I’m sure that somewhere here tonight somebody’s sitting down to a nice mutton stew. We just have to convince them to share.”

“And how do you think you’ll manage that?” Pallocons asked derisively. “I don’t see a wallet of Golden Suns at your belt, merchant.”

“I’m sure *you* wouldn’t have difficulty persuading any man to give you anything you asked for,” the female Oriadan sneered.

“Perhaps,” Pallocons answered. “There are some men I wouldn’t ask, though.”

“Come,” Kamar said, seeing Shaiara. “Share our roast mutton, our *kaffeyah*, our warm flatbread with spiced sauce.” He raised his mug.

Shaiara made a rude noise at his teasing and sat down, accepting a mug of watered broth. “They shriek like those tiny fur-covered men who lived in the trees in Abi’Abadshar,” she said in bafflement.

“Monkeys,” Harrier said, walking over and joining them. “And not yet. Not until tomorrow, maybe—when they realize we really do expect them to get up an hour before dawn and ride—or the day after that, when they’re *really* stiff and sore. Or when that blustering bully of a merchant realizes that nobody’s sitting down to roast mutton dinners, and that nobody cares who he is in Armethalieh.”

“I am sorry—for your sake—that they are not more grateful for the gift of their lives,” Ciniran said softly.

Harrier shook his head wearily. “It would be nice if they were. But—and I know all of them have been asking me to ‘understand’ and I’m sick of it—the thing of it is, Tyr and I, we spent a year and a half, pretty close, getting used to the whole idea of Demons and magic little by little as things got slowly worse and worse. Them, they just came down to Akazidas’Iteru and the next thing they knew they were being marched across the desert by a whole army of Shamblers while everyone around them died. And Armethalieh, it isn’t a place where . . . You could go your whole life without ever seeing somebody die. Without ever being too hot, or too cold, or thirsty, or hungry, or being in danger. It’s just the way things are there.” He shrugged. “They want to go back there. They don’t want to hear that they can’t. They’re afraid.”

“They’re soft.” Thadnat said flatly.

“They’re different, that’s all,” Harrier said, without apology or forgiveness in his voice. “Thadnat, if you’d never heard of Bisochim, or Ahairan, or any of this, and a thousand Shamblers came to the tents of the Nazindar one evening . . . what would *you* have done?”

Thadnat bowed his head. “I shall think upon your words, Harrier, and seek their wisdom.”

“It’s not—” Harrier said. “It’s just—Okay, fine. Think about my words if you like. But it’s just common sense. Not wisdom.” He glanced at the sky, then at Shaiara.

“I suppose it’s time to go and let Fannas tell me what a stupid idea saving their lives in the first place was.”

“I think it will be some days before Fannas speaks such words—at least openly,” Shaiara said. “For tonight, we must consider what that which you have learned from the northerners means.”

“Yeah,” Harrier said. He got to his feet. “Coming, Tyr?” he asked. Tiercel waved a hand vaguely, which might mean “yes,” or “no,” or “later.” Shaiara stood, and the two of them walked off.

Fifteen



Choosing Sides

TONIGHT'S COUNCIL WAS more heavily attended than usual. Not only Liapha and Fannas and Zanattar, but Omuta and Ogmazad and a dozen more *Ummarai*—and their *chaharums*—came to listen to what Harrier had to say, and the space outside the tent was ringed with watchers. Even Bisochim came. There wasn't any point in Harrier's pretending he didn't know what they'd come for, so he began with a brief summary of what he'd learned from Kave and Eugens and Lord Felocan about how Ahairan had taken the city and what she'd done then. He suspected it was old news to everyone here: if Fannas hadn't told them about it within the hour, then somebody from Fannas's tent certainly had—gossip spread through the camp as fast as it ever had on the Armethaliehan docks.

The important thing wasn't that the city had been destroyed—they all knew that by now—but that it had been attacked by the dried-out kind of Shambler they'd all grown too accustomed to seeing: the ones Ahairan Called up out of the destroyed *Iteru*-cities. According to Kave, the enormous Shambler army that had herded them south had been almost entirely composed of these "old" Shamblers—but the army Bisochim had just destroyed had been made up of "new" Shamblers—the former residents of Akazidas'Iteru.

"—so I think Ahairan was actually trying to move an army of durable Shamblers into position, and if Kave and the others have given us anything like an accurate count of what she sent to Akazidas'Iteru, she must be just about out of Shamblers now. So that means—"

He stopped as Magistrate Perizel and Lord Felocan walked into the tent.

"If this is a planning meeting, Master Gillain, I feel that it is inappropriate of you to hold it without me," Magistrate Perizel said stiffly.

"Why?" Harrier asked bluntly.

"You'll want—need—Magistrate Vaunnel's future assistance—and mine, as a representative of the authority of the Nine Cities. Mistress Liapha was most forthcoming this afternoon—something you apparently couldn't trouble yourself to be. You allowed me to believe that the destruction of the Border Cities was caused by some kind of Demonic blight, not a collection of . . . murderers, bandits, and criminals. And this Wildmage, Bisochim, wherever *he* is—he's the man who summoned up the Demon in the first place! And instead of . . . You're *helping* them. Do you have any possible defense for your actions?"

"Why yes, Magistrate Perizel. As a matter of fact, I do." Harrier got smoothly to his feet. "I'm a Wildmage."

Magistrate Perizel stared at him in silence, obviously waiting for more.

"Let me explain something to you about the nature of Demons, Madame Magistrate, since apparently you paid even less attention in Light Temple than *I* ever did. There's this thing about Demons. They're powerful, and they're evil, and they lie. Ahairan spent years lying to Bisochim—that's him, over there, the man who saved your life—and so Bisochim lied to the Isvaieni. This is Zanattar. He led the armies against the *Iteru*-cities. The people he trained while he was doing that are the people who rescued you and the people with you from the Shamblers. Now, as Lord Felocan is happy to remind me, I'm only Tradeborn scum. I don't know the law. But it seems to me that if somebody tricks somebody into doing something, or forces somebody to do something, they're the one to blame, not the person who was lied to."

Harrier felt as if he ought to be angrier, but it was hard to be angry when you were trying not to let anyone see how frightened you were. He wasn't afraid of Magistrate Vaunnel's wrath or of armies from the Nine Cities. He was afraid because he'd finally faced the truth he'd been running from since the moment Kareta had given him the Three Books. A Wildmage bowed to no authority in the world outside the Wild Magic itself. It was complete freedom, and complete bondage, and even if he'd *wanted* to accept Magistrate Perizel's authority, he couldn't. Not now. Never again.

"That . . . isn't exactly the point," Magistrate Perizel said uncertainly. "My authority—"

"You're right," Harrier answered. "It isn't the point. These people aren't guilty of anything—any of them—because they've been victims of a Demon. And you have no authority here. You can't blackmail me by saying I need to grovel to you so you'll put in a good word for me later. You can't threaten me with Magistrate Vaunnel's wrath. You—and your people—are all here on my sufferance. *Mine*, Magistrate Perizel. Nobody else's. Being here doesn't mean that you get to pretend you have any authority, and it doesn't mean you get to give orders. You're just another person in this camp, and right now you're not a particularly useful one. So I suggest that you go back to your tent, and sit down, and *shut up*—both of you—until I have time to deal with you."

Magistrate Perizel stared at him until Lord Felocan put a hand on her arm. Then she spun around and began to push her way back through the crowd surrounding the tent. When she turned to go, there was mocking laughter from the Isvaieni, and even Shaiara smiled faintly. At the sound of the laughter Lord Felocan paused, looking back at Harrier. His eyes were brilliant with rage, but Harrier didn't let himself react. He'd warned them over and over, and Magistrate Perizel had chosen to try to pull rank publicly. It had been a stupid thing for her to do.

She and Lord Felocan finally managed to get through the crowd of onlookers, and in their wake, Tiercel walked into the tent and stood just inside. From the sick expression on his face, it was obvious that he'd heard every word. Harrier turned away and sat down on the carpet again. He didn't want anyone here to see how badly his hands were shaking. It was one thing to *be* on your own, your own sole authority, wholly responsible for your own actions—and responsible for the lives of thousands of other people. It was another thing to admit it out loud. To *have* to admit it, and to know that if (miraculously), Ancaladar suddenly reappeared, bringing with him The Blessed Saint Idalia (the one he'd venerated in *The Litany of the Light*, not the one he'd met), Kellen The Poor Orphan Boy, Cilamen First Magistrate, and an entire Elven army to destroy Ahairan and rescue all of them, he'd still have to live out the rest of his life with no authority above him but the Three Books.

"You should have let them come in," Tiercel said, sitting down next to him. At the moment, Shaiara and Zanattar were leading the *Ummarai* in a discussion of what Ahairan might send against them if she had no more Shamblers, and Harrier was so grateful for that that he could have kissed, well, *Zanattar*.

At Tiercel's words, Harrier glared at him balefully. "And spend the next two hours listening to them explain what we ought to be doing?"

"Yes, actually. Having everyone hear that would have been good," Tiercel said, so low that—probably—only Harrier could hear him. "I was talking to Kave this evening after we stopped. Lord Felocan thinks we should bargain with Ahairan. Give her the Madiran on condition she stays here."

"Oh blessed eternal and perfect Light," Harrier said softly.

"I'm not sure I mind him being eaten—or whatever she'd do—if he tries to bargain with her," Tiercel said in a low voice. "What I worry about is him persuading

people that it's possible."

Harrier wanted—desperately—to think that couldn't happen, that the people who'd seen the worst that Ahairan could do could never be tempted to believe she would keep any promises she made. But they—all of them—were exhausted and frightened and slowly starving to death. There was nothing more likely than that they *would* believe it. And if they did, there might come a day—not so far off—when he, Tiercel, Bisochim, Shaiara, Zanattar, and the few dozen more people he knew absolutely he could trust would have to take the livestock and the *shotors* and fight their way free of the rest of the Isvaieni, abandoning them to death and Ahairan for the slim chance that they could manage an impossible journey north.

An impossible journey. Which meant that the moment the Isvaieni began to believe that Ahairan might be bargained with, Ahairan had won. Oh, Harrier could probably manage to keep himself and Tiercel—and even Saravasse and Bisochim—out of her hands. Probably. But only long enough so that they could manage to die rather than become her pawns. "Yeah," Harrier said. "Thanks. When we're done here, I'll go talk to him. Them. Explain why leaving her here to breed a new race of Demons is a stupid idea just to begin with, even if we thought she would."

"Try to be a little more diplomatic than you were here," Tiercel said.

"Oh, sure," Harrier said. "I'll tell him there'll be food at the end of the sennight. That should cheer everybody up."



TIERCEL thought that actually might help, especially if Harrier didn't mention that what was probably going to be on the menu would be roast *shotor* instead of roast mutton. He was hoping that a few days of sitting in one spot would give everyone time to think things through and decide they were happy to have been rescued, to realize that unfortunately they were still in a terrible situation that they'd never asked to be in, and to decide that they were going to do what they could to make the best of it.

He was actually worrying a lot more about Harrier right now.

Even before Harrier had made the speech that had led to Sathan and others riding off to their deaths, Tiercel had seen the changes in him. Knowing that a Demon wanted him not for *who* he was, but for *what* he was couldn't have been doing Harrier's nerves any more good than it was doing Tiercel's. Tiercel knew they'd never see Armethalieh again, but part of him had always insisted that they'd manage—somehow—and also wanted to believe that as soon as they did, everything that had happened to them would just melt away. They'd pass the Delfier Gates, and walk across Council Square, and Harrier would laugh, and clap him on the shoulder, and say: *Light and Darkness, that was a long vacation, wasn't it, Tyr? I'm just as glad to be home, though, and I hope Ma hasn't thrown my supper out into the yard for being so late!* And Tiercel would smile, and answer, just as he had on a thousand other evenings: *Well if she has, come around to our house. You know Mother's always happy to see you. And to feed you, too—*

And now he knew it would never happen.

Nobody growing up in the Rolfort household thought that Magistrates were godlike and faultless or even (unfortunately) incorruptible, but no matter what faults they had as *people*, as Magistrates they were *symbols*: of the safety and order and rule of law that he and Harrier were trying to defend here with not only their own lives, but with a lot of other peoples'. And Harrier had just flatly rejected all of that, and Tiercel didn't think he understood his friend at all any longer. Harrier had said all along that he was fighting for the Light, but if the Light wasn't all those things Magistrate Perizel stood for, then what was it?

But no. That wasn't really the question. The question was, what did Harrier think he was fighting for—if he wasn't fighting for those things—and who had he become?



"YOU know, I've been thinking," Tiercel said carefully, as they walked away from Fannas's tent afterward. "About the best way to be diplomatic with the Commissioners."

It had taken almost another two hours before the council decided that it was impossible to predict or plan for Ahairan's next attack, and that the best thing to do was just get to Saphthruk Oasis and decide what to do once they were there, now that they knew that Ahairan had taken Akazidas'Iteru. Tiercel wondered when Harrier planned to tell them that his strategy for fighting Ahairan didn't involve getting out of the Madiran or even carrying a warning to Armethalieh. Ever?

"Let Gens do it. He's family," Harrier answered without particular attention.

Tiercel sighed. "I know he's your brother, but right now he's part of the problem. And I know that nobody here cares who they are, and Ahairan doesn't either, and they don't have any actual power, but . . . You just can't talk to a Magistrate of the Nine Cities that way, Har. You *can't*."

"Have you been paying any attention at *all*?" When Harrier laughed, it wasn't in anger or contempt. It was the sound of someone at the edge of despair. "I'm a Wildmage. I've taken up the Three Books. My only job *in the entire world* is to do what the Wild Magic wants me to. Not Consuls. Not Magistrates. Not Elven Queens. Just the Wild Magic."

"And you said I was crazy for having visions." Tiercel stared at him, not sure whether to feel anger or pity.

"That was before I believed in visions. Not that I'm having visions. I hope I don't."

The fact that Harrier was saying these things—was discussing visions in the same matter-of-fact way he'd used to discuss dinner—was more distressing proof of how much their lives had changed. "What if you did?" Tiercel asked, because suddenly he had to know. "What if you had a vision and it told you to just go walking out into that desert out there, away from all of us, right then?"

"I hope I don't," Harrier said in a low voice.

"But you would? You'd do that? You'd go?" Tiercel demanded.

"Don't ask me that!" Harrier begged. "Do you . . . oh *Light*, do you have any idea at all how many unpaid MagePrices I'm carrying right now? Every Finding Spell, every minor Healing, every Sleep spell I've cast—they all carry Prices, you know, and I haven't paid a fraction of them. I can feel all of the ones I haven't, waiting for me."

"Well . . . pay them," Tiercel said blankly.

Harrier shook his head. "That's not how it works. The magic chooses what I pay and when. I don't. And I might even argue with the Wild Magic, but I'm going to listen to it. In the end. Not to Magistrate Vaunnel. Not to Vairindiel Elvenqueen. And now we both have the answer to why Wildmages don't tell anybody who they are and work in secret. So they never have to tell anybody what I've just told you."

Tiercel didn't know if what Harrier was telling him about Wildmages was actually true or not. It didn't contradict anything Tiercel knew about Wildmages, but Harrier was the first Wildmage Tiercel had spent any time around, at least that he knew of. Roneida didn't count and Bisochim wasn't exactly a regular Wildmage—not because of Saravasse, but because spending so long trying to Summon Ahairan had left him damaged in a way that nothing except—perhaps—time itself could heal. What Harrier was saying sounded almost like lunacy, but in a way, it was a relief for Tiercel to have his suspicions confirmed. If that was what you believed, then that was how you'd behave.

Tiercel remembered that even when Harrier had been absolutely convinced Tiercel was crazy, he'd stuck by him. Sennight after sennight with no more proof than Tiercel's word that he was having actual visions, and the visions were of something real, and had gone off with him to Sentarshadeen—and beyond. He could do at least as much for Harrier now. Maybe Harrier was crazy, and maybe Harrier was wrong—but the grim fact was, Tiercel didn't have any better plans to put forward.

"I guess being a Wildmage must be kind of awkward," Tiercel said.

"You have no idea," Harrier said feelingly. "I wish if I'd had to have magic, I'd been born a High Mage."

"No you don't," Tiercel said. "Think of all those books."

"I can read," Harrier said aggrievedly.

"Oh sure," Tiercel said, pretending to be unconvinced. "But some of those spells take almost a full chime to recite, and then you have to draw all the glyph-trines just so, and you have to memorize all two thousand, seven hundred, and four different combinations of the fifty-two glyphs—and that's just for the *simple* spells."

Harrier snorted. "Don't forget bringing a *stove* with you everywhere. Oh, and an apothecary's shop. And a library," he said. "And you wondered why the High Mages stopped being High Mages."

Neither one of them mentioned Ancaladar.

A few minutes after that Tengj, a Night Guard over the livestock, came to ask Harrier if he could come to take a look at something back in the meadow. He'd just seen a plant, Tengj said, that he had not seen grow there before and he feared to let the animals near it until a Wildmage said it was not poison. Harrier nodded, and told Tiercel to go on ahead.

Tiercel waved in salute, but as soon as Harrier had gone off with Tengj, he ducked down along a line of tents and went off in another direction entirely. There was really only one place he could take his uneasy thoughts to try to get them untangled. Fortunately, he didn't have far to search. In the early evening, before the herd had settled to sleep, Saravasse could almost always be found out on the desert just beyond the *shotor* grounds. Whether she was guarding against the animals taking fright and bolting or sizing up a future meal was anyone's guess. He walked up to her and leaned against her scaled side.

Moonturns ago—when he and she and Bisochim had been marooned probably no more than a few hundred miles from where they all were right now, he'd hated being near her because everything about her reminded him of Ancaladar. It still did, but he'd become fond of Saravasse as well. Not in the same way—that could never happen—but as a friend. Someone he'd come to trust.

"I grant you that there isn't much in our days to be merry about," Saravasse said, "but you seem even less joyful than usual this evening, Tiercel."

"Does it show?" he asked mournfully.

"My dear child, every thought your grandparents ever had is plain to read on your face. I'd say the same about Harrier, but he doesn't have that many," she added, and Tiercel snorted with laughter.

"Oh, stop. I think he's been having too many lately," Tiercel protested.

"Huh," Saravasse said in disbelief. "What is it now?"

"Do you—I mean—I, well, it didn't matter as much before, but tonight he talked to Magistrate Perizel, and . . . Saravasse, do you think he's crazy?" The horrible question—the question at the heart of Tiercel's fears—came out in a rush.

"Dear Tiercel, I think all of you born-mortal creatures are entirely mad," Saravasse said, after a startled pause. "I don't think that Harrier is madder than any other. Louder, perhaps."

"Oh, don't joke," Tiercel begged. "Not about this."

"I wasn't," Saravasse said, sounding surprised. "He yells a great deal, you know. But tell me why you think he's mad."

Tiercel leaned his head back against her side. Her scales were slick and warm. When he leaned his head back, he could look up at the sky and see the thick bright band of Pelashia's Veil. In the east, the moon was just rising, a smeary haze of gold upon the horizon. Even through the haze of Coldfire, the stars overhead were so bright and large they looked as if he could almost reach up and pluck them down. "He said that Magistrate Perizel doesn't have any authority here. And that he wouldn't let her attend the council meetings and pretend she did have. He *told* her that. And then he told me that the reason the Wildmages work in secret is because they don't acknowledge any authority except the Wild Magic, and that he'd do whatever it told him to."

"And which part of that strikes you as evidence of insanity?" Saravasse asked gently.

"It's *Harrier!*" Tiercel said helplessly.

"My dear one, your Harrier is a Wildmage. And from all you've told me, he has not been one for so very long, yes?"

"Um . . . I'm not sure exactly. A year?"

"I have some experience of Wildmages, though not with Wildmages in the beginning of their time. When I met my Bonded, he had already been a Blue Robe for more than half his life. But this much is true: a Wildmage answers to no one and to nothing save to the Wild Magic. Indeed, centuries ago they were hunted to the point of extinction for that very thing."

"That can't be true," Tiercel protested.

"Can it not? Somehow I believe it is. In the Time of Mages, to be a Wildmage and discovered by the Mages of Armethalieh was a sentence of death. The High Mages hunted them to the borders of the Elven Lands themselves, with every spell they had once used to hunt the Endarkened, year upon year, century upon century, because they feared a magic—and a Mage—that would bow to no law outside itself."

"But then how did Saint—I mean Idalia—and Kellen—"

"You aren't interested in ancient history tonight. Not really," Saravasse said. "You want to know if your friend is mad. This I cannot say. Tactless, perhaps. But telling the truth about Wildmages, certainly."

"How can he take orders from some *books*?" Tiercel demanded in frustration.

"Do you not do much the same when you guide your life by *The Book of the Light*?" Saravasse asked softly.

Tiercel groaned inarticulately and fixed his eyes on the night sky. *Yeah, but at least I read books before all this started.* After a while he said: "Where do Endarkened come from?"

"Shadow Mountain," Saravasse said promptly. "Isn't this rather a sweeping change of subject?"

"Um . . . no. You're right, I guess. Either Harrier isn't any crazier than the rest of us, or if he is, it isn't in a way I'll be able to see—and he put up with me when he thought *I* was crazy, so . . . Anyway, Lord Felocan wants to make a truce with Ahairan, though, and—"

"Now *there's* a madman," Saravasse said dryly, and Tiercel snickered despite himself.

"And that's stupid, so Harrier has to go convince him—or—or *something*—that any kind of bargain that leaves Ahairan here to make more Demons is a bad idea, but I'm still wondering how she's planning to do it."

"Oh, there's a question," Saravasse said. "And even if Ahairan isn't actually Endarkened, I can't even help you by telling you what the Elves know about how the Endarkened made more Endarkened—if they ever did—because they don't know. No one ever knew much about the Endarkened. Even about their creation, all there

were, were legends. The legends say that the first Endarkened were made by He-Who-Is out of Elves, since Darkness cannot create, only Taint.”

“And the Great Sacrifice of the Blessed Saint Idalia . . .” Tiercel stopped. The next lines of the Litany went: . . . *destroyed the power of the Endarkened forever, cast down the Queen of the Demons, slew the Queen of the Endarkened and Anigrel the Black, the great Deceiver, and barred Darkness from the world forever.* And it hadn’t.

“You’d have to ask somebody else about that. I hadn’t been hatched yet,” Saravasse said. “And if Ancaladar hadn’t been able to find Cortiana and Mebadaene—and find Bondmates for them—I never would have been. Once, the three of them were the last of the dragons. Now they are the oldest. Or is that “were”? I don’t know.”

“Everyone says Ancaladar isn’t dead,” Tiercel said bitterly.

“I don’t know whether he is or not,” Saravasse answered simply. “But Cortiana’s and Mebadaene’s Bondmates were not young even when I left the Elven Lands. Soon their time will end, if it hasn’t already, and then Cortiana and Mebadaene will die.”

“According to the walls at Abi’Abadshar, the Bond was never supposed to be that way. It wasn’t that way in Great Queen Vielissar Farcarinon’s time. A Dragonbond was passed on, from Bonded to Bonded, just as Ancaladar’s was passed from Jermayan to me,” Tiercel said miserably.

The body beneath his back heaved as Saravasse huffed a heavy breath: surprise, irritation, Tiercel wasn’t quite sure. He knew that she was still just as flummoxed about his account of the transference of the Dragonbond now as she’d been the first time he’d told it to her—and she’d never stopped being angry with Bisochim, no matter how much she loved him, for all the things that he’d done just to keep her from dying in the few short decades of his life.

“Tiercel, Dragons who Bond have died since before the race of Men walked beneath the light of the sun. It is the bargain Tannetarie the White made for our race, and it’s simply the way things are. It’s why nearly all our race died in the Great War: we Bonded, we fought, and we died. Attempts to change that bring . . . well, as you’ve seen. I only pray that this is the worst that will come of my Bonded’s love for me.” It wasn’t, Saravasse’d told him in an unguarded moment once, that she’d precisely made her peace with mortality—but she would have been a lot more reconciled to it if the two of them had been able to spend Bisochim’s lifespan together in happiness, instead of Saravasse being forced to watch him do what he *had* done.

“Saravasse?” She sounded more troubled than Tiercel had ever heard her. He reached out to press a hand against her side.

“For now, Ahairan kills us by ones and twos and sometimes by dozens,” Saravasse said slowly. “Her goal is to repopulate the world with a new race of Demons using a Tainted Mage, something I sincerely hope I am not around to witness, whatever method she’s contemplating using. But the crux of the matter is the three of you. I would like to think that Bisochim would allow me to die, or that you and Harrier would each allow the other to die, or that Harrier would allow his brother to die, or that you would both allow those of the Isvaieni whom you have come to hold dear to die. And perhaps you would have. Once. But there are so many hostages here, Tiercel—thousands of them. Just how long can you and Harrier and even my Beloved watch everyone around you die before you will do *anything* to stop it?”

Tiercel was trying to come up with a good answer to that—or any answer—when he heard the signal whistles of the sentries begin to shrill.



TENGI’S plant was covered with a dense prickly fur—like millions of fine hairs—and Harrier couldn’t see any leaves at all. The vines were a sort of grayish-brownish color, like most of the desert vegetation, except for the tiny tendrils that curled away from the main vine. Those were actually green, and each one had two or three tiny yellow flowers sprouting from it. At least it was easy to find: it was the patch of tangled vine-stuff surrounded by a bunch of Isvaieni who were shooing away a bunch of very interested goats. What worried Harrier was that none of the Isvaieni recognized it, because they were the ones who’d grown up here. “You sure you’ve never seen this thing before?” Harrier asked, straightening up from his inspection.

“Never, Harrier! On my life!” Tengi said. The other eight men and women of the Night Herd Guard all agreed with Tengi. So either all of them were from the Madiran and not the Deep Desert—and Harrier knew perfectly well that Tengi was Fadaryama and the Fadaryama were a Deep Desert herding tribe—or this really *was* something new and different. He brushed his fingers over the plant. All he discovered for his pains was that the things that looked like fine hairs were actually hair-fine *thorns*. He got no sense of Taint from it, but he might not, even if Ahairan had created it in her own kitchen. Assuming Ahairan had a kitchen. The only thing he could do now was see if Tengi’s plant killed him—he trusted the Wild Magic to tell him if the plant was poisonous, but to get a decision from the Wild Magic, he’d have to taste it, or at least get close to tasting it.

Since it was new growth, the vine was about as soft and pliant as the desert stuff got. He pulled his *geschak* and cut off a section, collecting several more stinging thorn pricks in the process. He’d wonder who’d want to eat this stuff, except for the fact that he’d seen the goats and *shotors* chow down on actual thornbush that had thorns as long as his thumb knuckle.

The end of the vine leaked a clear sticky sap. Harrier sniffed it. It smelled sort of like a cross between nothing and sort of bad, but when he lifted it warily toward his mouth, he didn’t feel that sense of *warning* he’d had in Abi’Abadshar when Marap had offered him the cherry-like berries. And okay, that still didn’t mean he wanted a mouth full of thorns. He let the sap drip onto his tongue. It tasted a little like . . . yes. That was what the smell reminded him of—the waterproofing compound the fishing fleet used on its sails. And when they were boiling up a batch up the beach and the wind shifted, you could smell it all the way down to the Portmaster’s Office. Tyr refused to come down to the docks at all on days like that. Harrier’s tongue tingled a bit and he could taste it all the way in the back of his throat—a flavor like charcoal and varnish—but he didn’t feel poisoned. For good measure he ate a couple of the yellow flowers. They tasted like . . . flowers.

That should have been the end of it, because the vine wasn’t poisonous, and it wasn’t Tainted, but then Harrier found himself trapped in a debate with Tengi, Runas, Kiraban, Ophiru, Macaba, Zirah, Basi, Suza, and Azirah over where such a previously-unknown plant could possibly have come from. Since Harrier had no idea—and couldn’t even offer a reasonable theory—he was pretty much reduced to playing referee while the nine Isvaieni argued with each other and the goats ate the vines down to nubs. Exasperating as that was, it was still more fun than what Harrier knew he *ought* to be doing—going and talking to Lord Felocan and trying to make it clear that Lord Felocan knew that trying to make any kind of bargain with Ahairan was the worst idea in the history of really bad ideas—but he was finally about to suggest that he should find Bisochim (because if Bisochim had even less interest in this argument than Harrier did, at least he could make everything sprout up again nice and lush a few more times) when he heard the warning whistles.

It had been Ciniran’s suggestion to carve whistles that everyone could hear, and there’d been plenty of boiled bones to use as raw material. While everyone didn’t have one yet, all the sentry-riders did and the sound carried for miles at night. At the first long warning blast, Harrier was already running toward the sound, even before he heard the four quick blasts that signified “*south*.”



ADUNI and Jekin were at the south at the moment. The sentries rode in pairs about three hundred *trayas* apart—a hundred yards was far enough apart so that something that attacked one sentry probably wouldn’t get the other, but close enough so that they could keep watch over each other as well. As he ran, Harrier pulled globes of Coldfire from the places he knew could spare them, sending them out across the desert, and in their light the enemy was clearly visible. Harrier wasn’t the first one at the southern edge of the camp—the Isvaieni from those tents were already standing at the edge of the camp with their weapons ready. Harrier grabbed the first

two he reached. “Find Bisochim and bring him here,” he said with quiet urgency. They were out of arrows and they had only a handful of spears. Against this enemy, *awardans* wouldn’t be enough.

By the light of the Coldfire, Harrier could see thirty-one Black Dogs loping toward the encampment with easy confidence, and this time they had no *ikulas* hounds to fight for them. At the moment he saw them, Harrier’s Mage-Sight showed him how the pack was going to fragment, each Dog following a different path toward the heart of the encampment, attempting to do as much destruction there as it could. The Black Dogs were massively-muscled and impervious to every spell of Command that Bisochim had ever tried. They could be burned to ash by a Wildmage spell or frozen in a block of ice, but that was about it. Throat and belly were vulnerable to a blade—and eyes, if you had a blade small enough, and were fast enough—but you could cut them half to pieces and they’d still keep coming. . .

If everyone had done what they were supposed to do when they heard the alarm, right now there were people guarding the *shotors*, people guarding the flock, people ringing the camp itself to watch for something attempting to slip past that line. If they weren’t all in position yet, they should be in a few minutes more. Only they didn’t have a few minutes. The Black Dogs moved faster than the fastest racing *shotor*.

Aduni was one of the two southern sentries. She was no Knight-Mage, but she’d lost her leg the first time they’d faced the creatures, and she knew too well how much destruction the Dogs could bring if they got into the encampment. Now she flogged her *shotor* viciously across flanks and withers, forcing it to run directly at the pack. It took the Dogs only moments to pull down the *shotor* and to kill Aduni as well, but they were moments the camp would not have gained without her sacrifice. Even as she died, Harrier and the Isvaieni were running to attack.

The first of the Black Dogs skipped out of Harrier’s way, red tongue lolling as if it was laughing at him. MageSight showed him a tracery of light over its body and out across the desert, red and yellow and blue and green. Where it had been. Where it would go. His attacks. Its attacks. Red and green faded away as he watched. He wasn’t its prey, and it was out of his reach.

In that moment, all the pent-up anger Harrier had felt since the moment they’d spotted the Shambler army—feelings he’d tried to wish away, talk himself out of, turn into something else—boiled over. If he’d possessed the spells to Call lightning from the skies, he would have incinerated the entire pack—and possibly a good portion of the camp as well.

The *Book of Sun* said that anger was a tool of the Knight-Mage.

Time seemed to slow.

The tracteries of light faded away.

Harrier ran into the path of the next Dog. It didn’t seem to see him until he’d made his first attack. The red droplets of its blood flew from the blade of his *awardan* and hung in the air like snowflakes swirling in the wind. It turned to snap at him, but he already knew where it would be. He stepped closer, inside its attack, and struck again. His second blow severed its spine. He knew he didn’t have the strength to do something like this. He didn’t care. *The Knight-Mage moves through the battle as a fish moves through water, but all gifts come at a cost.* He sought out another target.

In his next fight he lost his *geschak*.

It was as if the Black Dog cooperated in its own destruction, moving slowly, like it was underwater. Harrier knew it couldn’t be, but it didn’t matter what the reality was. The illusion was enough to allow him to slide by, close enough to touch, and slam his *geschak* into its eye. He was afraid it wouldn’t be a killing blow, but he’d struck hard and true, and as the Black Dog foamed and howled and thrashed out its death agonies upon the ground, he sought another target. The knife was jammed too deeply into the eye-socket of the Black Dog to be pried loose; he left it behind.

His third opponent nearly killed him. He knew every move it was going to make before it happened, but whatever speed and power and MageSight he’d managed to draw on burned through his strength to the point that even determination wasn’t enough. Harrier could feel the blackness of unconsciousness licking around the edges of his vision even as he closed with the Dog. Seven dead—the Isvaieni’d killed five—the rest still heading for the camp, and if he couldn’t kill this one nothing else would matter to him, because it would have killed him. He wasn’t thinking any of this in words. He wasn’t thinking at all. He was preparing his attacks, lining them up, and one and two and three and the attempt to sever the Dog’s spine with an overhand cut didn’t work because he’d lost the spell-driven edge of strength that let him do it the first time, and that left him at the wrong angle for a direct cut to the throat, and the Black Dog bled from his strike where its neck met its shoulder but that wasn’t a killing blow, and he reversed the *awardan* and brought it down with all the force he had left across the top of its muzzle, letting the shock of impact bounce his sword-arm back, watching as the Black Dog dropped its head, snarling in pain, then raised it, and finally—finally—the blade of his *awardan* buried itself heavily in the monster’s throat.

And his fourth attack killed it.

His *awardan* slipped from his fingers as the Dog’s lifeless body slumped to the ground. Harrier stared at the *awardan* in faint surprise. *I didn’t mean to drop that.* He thought he should pick it up and go back to the encampment, but suddenly his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground, kneeling beside the Dog’s body. Whatever had been going on to let him do what he’d done stopped going on, and Harrier realized that he could feel the night wind again, and smell blood, and that he’d dropped his cloak somewhere because he was cold, and that in the distance he could hear screams and shouts and Saravasse bellowing.

Yeah, okay.

He meant to say it out loud, to get up, to go help, or at least to look in the direction of the camp, but he was too exhausted to move. He was thirsty and starving and his head pounded and he thought that it was somehow terribly unfair that whatever had happened to him was something he’d managed to do to himself.



“STAY here,” Saravasse said, the moment she and Tiercel heard the whistles shrill. She stepped carefully away from the edge of the *shotor* grounds. People were already running toward them carrying saddles—so that as many of the *shotors* would be ready to ride as possible—and others were carrying swords. Tiercel saw Saravasse lift her head, searching for the source of the threat. He didn’t wait to see what she found. He turned away and headed back toward the center of the camp.

Harrier wasn’t there by the time Tiercel reached it, and none of the Isvaieni who *were* there knew what the danger was. Tiercel thought he should try to get back to their tents—after the way Harrier had left things with Lord Felocan, Magistrate Perizel, and the others, Tiercel wasn’t sure they’d stay put when the camp was in an uproar, and he knew nobody had explained to them yet what the whistles meant. But whether it was a good idea or not, he couldn’t do it. He was too desperately needed here. The sheep and goats smelled something—Tiercel didn’t know what—and because Bisochim wasn’t here to bespell them, they were trying to bolt between the tents. Every hand was needed.

While he was wrestling a muddy goat—and losing—Tiercel found out what the danger was that they were facing. He looked up and found himself nose-to-muzzle with a dog the size of a pony. *Oh, so that’s what Harrier meant when he talked about the Black Dogs.* . . Its lips drew back in a silent snarl, and without even thinking about it Tiercel let go of the goat and flung himself backward. The goat sprang out of his arms, and the Black Dog whipped its head sideways, crushing the goat’s body in one bite. As Tiercel scrambled into the middle of the herd on hands and knees, one of the Isvaieni guarding the herd stepped over him to move into the Dog’s path. Tiercel knew who she was—Naura of the Tunag—but in the chaos he didn’t see what happened next, although he didn’t see the Dog again, either. (It wasn’t until the following evening, when he heard the final reckoning of this evening’s dead—by name and tribe, from the lips of their *Ummarai*—that Tiercel heard

from *Ummara* Sumadar of the Tunag that Naura was dead.) Now that they'd actually seen one of the Black Dogs, it wasn't possible to keep the livestock from panicking, but the Isvaieni were all grimly attempting to keep them from bolting outright. It seemed like an eternity—during which Tiercel was both trampled and bitten—before Bisochim arrived to bespell them before running off again.

In the abrupt silence that descended when the sheep and goats *shut up*, Tiercel could hear Saravasse roaring. And then, as his ears adjusted further—like when your eyes adjusted from light to shadow—he could hear the cries of pain and the shouts for aid coming from nearby. He knew he wasn't that badly hurt. He dragged himself to his feet and went to find someone who needed help.



IT didn't seem to matter how many times he was in what Zanattar and other Young Hunters said were battles, he never seemed to learn anything from them, Tiercel thought gloomily. He told himself that he should be inured to the sight of blood and wounds and death by now, to the fact that there was nothing he or anyone else could do for a dying man but sit beside him as he screamed for a wife and children who'd died sennights before. But somehow it didn't get less terrible just because it was familiar. Each time was worse. Each time was more of a shock, as if every time his mind had decided: *yes, that was horrible, but it was the last time and it will never happen again.* And it always did.

He didn't know how Harrier stood it.

It was hard to say that the battle was going on this minute and over that minute. Scraps of information were passed from one person to the next until they reached the center of the camp, only to be contradicted in the next moment. The *shotors* had bolted. The *shotors* were all dead. Hundreds of people had been killed. Ahairan had come in person. Goblins were fighting beside the Black Dogs. No, their casualties were light, and the Black Dogs all but slain. After the first several rumors, Tiercel tried not to listen to any of them, and simply worked. Here the carpets had to be stripped from the floor of a tent so that the dead could be piled inside and guarded in case they rose up as Shamblers. There another tent—two, three—were thrown open so that the wounded could be sorted out for Healing; the most serious cases together, then on and on to the ones who might heal by themselves—did the Isvaieni dare allow any injury to be left untreated. Most of the lightly-wounded had been bitten or trampled by animals, one woman had a broken leg.

Tiercel was about to go and fetch water before returning to sit with the most seriously injured when Thadyan—who had taken Hadyan's place among the Kadyastar as Liapha's *chaharum* and the Kadyastar's *Ummara*—in waiting—grabbed his arm and shoved him into the tent with the most lightly wounded.

"See, northermer?" Thadyan said, prodding at Tiercel's arm. "That blood is not all Isvaieni blood, though I grant that by now you bleed sand like one of the desertborn."

"Ow," Tiercel said reflexively. He pulled up his sleeve, pulling the fabric of his robe out of his flesh to do it. "Ow," he repeated, looking at the bruised and torn flesh. It hadn't hurt until he'd looked at it. "What bit me?"

"Easier to say what did not," Thadyan answered brusquely. "Come and sit and stay where you are set."

It was sensible advice—even if it wasn't very welcome—but it did seem to mean that the danger was over. That didn't mean they had any real news about how the fight had gone—other than that they'd won—and the things Tiercel *did* hear were still unlikely. Harrier had flown up into the sky. Harrier had become invisible. Harrier had broken the neck of one of the Black Dogs with nothing more than his bare hands. About the time Tiercel began to seriously worry, Jekin and Kamar came in, supporting Harrier between them.

"What happened to him?" Tiercel demanded, springing to his feet at the same time Harrier said, "You're bleeding," and pulled away from Kamar and Jekin. Harrier took an unsteady step forward, and staggered into Tiercel. "On me," Harrier added.

"I got bitten," Tiercel admitted.

"By a goat," Kamar added helpfully.

"Oh, sit down before you fall down," Tiercel told Harrier, irritable with relief.

The two of them never did figure out what had actually happened to Harrier. He admitted to Tiercel that while he hadn't flown through the air—nor, as far as he knew, turned invisible—he *had* killed three of the Black Dogs by himself. "How" was simple enough—he'd used an *awardan*—but as for what had enabled him to do that . . . Harrier was just as baffled as Tiercel was. All he knew was that he'd barely managed to kill the third, and felt terribly weak afterward, and if Jekin hadn't ridden out and found him, he'd probably still be sitting out there on the desert.

"You shouldn't do things like that," Tiercel said helplessly. Harrier only snorted.



HARRIER refused to go off and rest until he knew how many they'd lost tonight. The Black Dogs' targets had clearly been the animals—a hundred and thirteen people were dead, and more than three hundred injured, many in ways that Bisochim couldn't repair, though he could Heal them—but everyone's tale was the same: over and over the Dogs had broken off attacks on people to go after *shotors* or to try to reach the herds. Thirty *shotors* were dead and another hundred had required Healing, and over three hundred of the goats and sheep were dead. At least having the full tally of the dead told them who *wasn't* dead: none of the Armethaliehans were among the casualties.

The one glimmer of good news in all of this was that the flesh of the dead animals could be salvaged as food—both Harrier and Bisochim agreed the meat wasn't tainted—so everyone who was neither injured nor on guard was set to work butchering.

Someone had brought some of the younger *ikulas* puppies into the tent. One of the youngest, a bit over five moonturns and all legs at the moment, was flopped across Tiercel's lap. He rubbed its ears absently as he spoke.

"I just wish that some of this made *sense*," he said. Tiercel was still waiting for Bisochim—and not looking forward to having a Wild Magic spell actually cast *on* him (for the third time), but the alternative, as Harrier had cheerfully informed him, was having the wound go bad, since they had no medicine left.

"You expect a Demon to make sense?" Harrier asked idly. He was sitting on the floor beside Tiercel, another *ikulas* beside him. "I wonder where she keeps things like the Black Dogs when she isn't sending them after us. They're flesh and blood. They have to eat. Don't they?"

"I don't know," Tiercel said simply. He'd gotten familiar with this mood of Harrier's over the past several moonturns: too tired to sleep, too tired to do anything but keep picking at the same unanswerable questions. Thirty-one Black Dogs had attacked them and they'd managed to kill all of them. That was something. "Maybe she makes new ones each time she needs some."

"That would at least be convenient," Harrier muttered. The *ikulas* beside him yawned—a wide gape of white teeth and pink tongue. Harrier yawned in sympathy and Tiercel found himself echoing the two of them.

"Go to bed," he begged. "Otherwise, you'll still be here when Bisochim gets around to me."

"Yeah, and then I'll get to watch you vomit and pass out," Harrier said.

"Find something else to do for fun," Tiercel said. "Go bother Eugens."

“Yeah,” Harrier said with a sigh, groaning as he got to his feet. “He’s probably still awake. They’re probably *all* still awake.” He yawned again. “I can go have a lovely conversation with Madame Magistrate and His Noble Whatsis about Ahairan being out to kill all of us so negotiating with her probably isn’t a really bright idea.”

“Tactfully,” Tiercel reminded him.

“Tactfully,” Harrier agreed.



THE young *ikulas* followed along at Harrier’s heels as he walked across the camp. Saravasse was standing guard over the not-exactly-burial parties out on the desert; the camp would still be recovering from the attack at dawn, but they couldn’t spend a full day here. The smell would be too bad once the wind shifted—if not today, then certainly by tomorrow. And besides, who knew what might be out here that would be attracted to all that spoiling meat?

Harrier was just as glad not to have to be there when Bisochim Healed Tiercel. He knew Tiercel wasn’t looking forward to it at all, and they both knew there wasn’t any other choice. The camp might be relatively clean, but an animal bite turned poisonous quickly.

When he reached their tents, the *ikulas* puppy suddenly bounded ahead into Shaiara’s tent. He hurried after it, suddenly worried. If Ahairan had sent something besides the Black Dogs—if there were *atish’ban-jarrari* in the camp—

But no.

When Harrier got to the entrance, he saw that the tent was empty, but that everything in it had been mixed up. All the chests that held food had been moved away from the tent walls and stacked in the middle of the floor. The ones that Bisochim had bespelled shut were still intact, but the others had all had the ropes securing their tops cut. The *ikulas* had pushed the lid off of one of them and was nosing into it. As he watched, it balanced on the edge, a nearly empty sack of candied dates in its jaws.

“No,” Harrier said, taking the bag away from it.

It pranced around him, begging. He reached into the bag, pulled out a date and tossed it to the *ikulas* before pulling the cord tight again and tossing it back into the open chest. Then he conjured a ball of Coldfire and inspected the damage more closely.

The *kaffeyah* was still here, and the spices. All the dried fruit except those last few dates was gone. The few sacks of roasted nuts, the six tightly-wrapped packets of oiled paper, that contained—or *had* contained—about ten pounds of various kinds of candy, the honey and sugar, and both the jugs of date wine—gone. *Well, so much for my ability to do a Scrying Spell if we happen to need one*, Harrier thought distantly. He quickly inspected the other two chests. One held nothing but ground flour. It had been completely searched, but its contents were still intact. The other chest held dried salted fruit, some blocks of a vegetable paste the Isvaieni used in stews, a few bags of *xocalatl* beans. Some of the blocks of the vegetable paste had been unwrapped, and the bags of fruit and *xocalatl* had been opened, but most of it was there.

He closed up all the open chests and shoved them more-or-less back into their places, breathing hard. While everyone else in the camp had been out fighting for their lives—and fighting to protect *these* people—the Armethaliehans had repaid them by looting and gorging themselves. He went into the other tent.

Kave, Eugens, and Magistrate Perizel were there, but they were the only ones in the tent. All three of them were sound asleep on their sleeping mats. The two jugs of date wine lay on the rug between them. He stepped over Eugens and picked up the nearer one. Empty, just as he’d thought. He kicked Eugens. Hard.

It took two or three kicks before Eugens roused. “Get up, you filthy thief,” Harrier said. “By the Eternal Light, I’m glad Da isn’t here to see you steal food from people who are starving.”

“What . . . ?” Eugens sat up, blinking groggily at Harrier. “Har . . . ?”

“You stole food from our tent,” Harrier said. “And then you stuffed yourselves.”

“I—no!” Eugens said. He looked stubborn and angry and guilty. “Believe what you want.”

“I believe it’s *gone*,” Harrier said. “Where are the others? Looking for more? Do you know what the penalty is for stealing food? Do you think I’m going to protect you?”

“Nobody . . . all right. I suppose they did.” Magistrate Perizel sat up, rubbing her head as if it hurt. “What *is* the penalty for stealing food?” She sounded as if she was curious.

“It’s death,” Harrier said quietly.

“But you—” Kave said. He’d sat up while they were talking, looking as if he had the same headache as the other two.

“Have so much?” Harrier asked in contempt. “What’s stored in our tent is all there is—*was*—in the entire camp. It was in Shaiara’s tent so I could—we could—guard it. Now I need to go and tell them that you took it.”

“Yes, we searched your tent,” Magistrate Perizel said. “I admit that much. But Lord Felocan was looking for weapons and supplies. He—they—took it with them. And most of the wine. But he said it would be better for us if we couldn’t say where they’d gone . . .”

“So we all drank some,” Kave finished defiantly. “They filled some water-skins with the rest. Lord Felocan said they’d need it to purify the water.”

Harrier stared from Magistrate Perizel to Kave to his brother. All of them looked angry. None of them looked sorry. *You all have to have drunk more than “some” if you slept through the entire attack*, he thought uncharitably. But it was possible. They were still drained from the Healing Trance, underfed—like everyone else here—and the desert heat was exhausting. It still didn’t excuse them.

“They left—and you didn’t try to stop them? Are you crazy? What do you think they can possibly do out there in the desert except die?” Harrier demanded.

“They wanted to take their chances on their own,” Eugens said stubbornly. “Even if the *Iteru*-cities were attacked, the wells will still be good, and—”

“The wells were all poisoned,” Harrier said flatly. “And unless your friends figured out some way to take a tent, a dozen *shotors*, and a couple of barrels of water with them, they’d never get there even if Ahairan isn’t going to kill them by midday. You are irresponsible,” he said to Magistrate Perizel. “Now take those jugs back to the other tent, put them back where you got them, and pray that nobody finds out they were tampered with until I get back.”

“Where are you going?” Kave asked, as Harrier strode from the tent.

“To bring back those idiots,” Harrier said.



IF he could get back the food they’d stolen, there might be a chance to save their lives. He’d still have to announce the theft. Someone would discover what was missing sooner or later—the chests that weren’t sealed by magic were available for inspection at any time. Suspicion would tear the camp apart. Announcing what had happened would be better than that, no matter what it led to. Even if it meant the others had to die, because anyone who grew up around ships and the sea knew that if you made a rule meant to keep people alive you had to enforce it when you didn’t want to. Especially even then. Because if you didn’t, it was worse than never having made the rule at all.

But Harrier desperately hoped it wouldn't come to that.

At first he was confident that it would be easy enough to bring back the five Armethaliehans. They couldn't get far without *shotors*. He supposed it was wrong to be thinking of them as criminals to be hunted down, but Harrier couldn't help it. It had been less than two days since the Isvaieni had rescued them from the middle of Ahairan's Shambler army, and the moment the Isvaieni dropped their guard—because Ahairan was attacking them *again*—the Armethaliehans had stolen anything they could lay their hands on and run off.

No one Harrier passed as he walked through the camp had seen Lord Felocan, Mistress Pallocons, Master Froilax, or Goodsir and Goodlady Oriadan since the first alarms had sounded hours before. He'd have to go ask Saravasse: even though she couldn't fly, she had a much higher vantage point than anyone, and could see for miles. Since she was still out helping the "burial" parties, he went down to the *shotor* grounds. He might have to run all over the camp looking for a bunch of idiots who couldn't wait half a day like civilized people to get things explained to them, but he was damned if he was adding a mile hike onto the top of it.

The wind was freshening with dawn by the time he reached the *shotor* grounds. Normally he'd be getting up just about now, but in fact he hadn't been to bed yet. He was trying to remember when the last time was that he'd been to bed. Not last night. Maybe the night before. Tiercel would probably know.

Halban of the Kamazan (not really *Kamazan* now, since the few survivors of the Kamazan had joined the Khulbana, but in the way of the Isvaieni he would be known as "Halban of the Kamazan" until he died) and Tiralda of the Kareggi were two of the Night Herd Guards. Harrier had grown to like both of them a lot over the past moonturns. He tried not to think about the fact that both of them had been at Tamatha'Iteru. When he had nothing else to occupy his mind—something become more and more irregular as the sennights passed—he wondered if Macenor Telchi would have liked them too. He thought he would have, and could never decide whether he was betraying his teacher's memory by thinking that the Telchi might have liked some of the people who'd been responsible for his death. They hadn't mean to kill innocent people, but that wasn't really an absolution; Bisochim hadn't meant to call up a Demon, either. Which mattered more, intentions or actions?

A year ago he wouldn't have asked.

"You should go and get someone to take over for you," he said when he got there. "We're going to be here for . . . Well, we're going to be here a while longer."

"That sack of suet can sleep here as well as in his tent," Tiralda said, with a twitch of her hip in Halban's direction.

Harrier thought that Halban might have been big—or even fat—once, but no one was now. Fannas had been as plump as an Armethaliehan merchant when they'd left Telinchechitl. He was as gaunt as any of the Young Hunters now.

"True," Halban said placidly. "And perhaps with the northerners gone, the Demon-queen will turn her thoughts to them instead of us for a day, and I can sleep undisturbed."

"You've seen them?" Harrier asked sharply. "Tonight?"

"Huh. Only five of them," Tiralda said. "They came two handspans ago, after you had slain the Black Dogs, and took five of the *shotors* that I had left saddled for the new sentries, for you know that with all being so disordered no one would think to look upon the sky until the last minute, and who would wish to ride longer than he must?"

"You just . . . let them," Harrier said slowly.

"It is true, Harrier, it was bad and rude of them to steal, but far better that they be gone than here to plague us, so it is already forgiven," Halban said. "Should any dispute my decision, indeed *Ummara* Ranurnin of the Khulbana, my tribe now, will be certain to pay the cost in *shotors* of his own holdings."

Harrier didn't bother to start another chapter of the endless debate over whether or not any tribe still owned specific *shotors* or numbers of *shotors*. Two handspans was two bells, maybe as much as three. He didn't know why Saravasse hadn't seen them go—or maybe she'd just shared the general feeling of "good riddance"—but she probably wouldn't be able to spot them now.

He had a surer way.

"Halban, may I borrow your *geschak* for a moment?" he asked.

"Take it, Harrier, with my blessing. It is a rare thing to be able to give a gift to a Blue Robe."

"Thank you, Halban. I'll remember this," Harrier said.

The small curved knife was sharp. All the tools of the Isvaieni were sharp. Harrier made a ragged scratch across his forearm and then smeared the blood on both palms for good measure, just as he always did. A Finding Spell was simple enough to cast—all you needed was a drop of your own blood and a sincere desire to find what you were looking for. And he did.

No matter how many times he cast these "minor" spells of the Wild Magic—spells large enough to carry MagePrice, though usually a light one—Harrier never got used to how between one moment and the next the *need* to do what he actually wanted to do anyway came over him.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to saddle even more *shotors*," he heard himself say. He walked among the harnessed and waiting animals, threading each lead-rope through the hitching place on the saddle of the beast before it, "I need to take six of these."

"Of course, Harrier," Tiralda said, looking surprised that he was asking.

As Harrier climbed into the saddle of the first animal, tucking the lead-rope of the first *shotor* in the line behind it beneath his thigh, Shaiara came running toward him.

"Where do you ride in such haste?" she demanded, her breathlessness conflicting with the composure of her question.

"I'm pretty sure you already know," Harrier answered. Shaiara would have been back to the tents by now. She would have known in an instant that somebody had been tampering with the trunks. And Magistrate Perizel might be a Magistrate of Armethalieh, but Harrier didn't think that really counted for a lot with the *Ummara* of the Nalzindar.

"They are foolish, and only a liability—as they have already proven," Shaiara said. "They have made their choice. Let them go."

The fact that he'd said almost the same words to Tiercel not that long ago—I'm giving them a choice—didn't make them any sweeter to hear. And he couldn't really explain why letting the Binrazan, the Barantar, and the Thanduli leave because they wanted to was different than letting the five Armethaliehans leave because *they* did. All he knew was that he couldn't follow Shaiara's advice, and he couldn't ask the rest of the Isvaieni to help him search. If the whole encampment went after them, he put them all at risk. But if they abandoned them, it was still a precedent for abandoning innocent (if stupid) people just for convenience.

"Going after them would be pretty stupid after they ran off, wouldn't it?" he said.

"And yet you are," Shaiara answered. "You cannot possibly expect to track even five *shotors*. I will—"

"I've already done a spell. It'll take me right to them," Harrier said. He could feel it pulling at him harder with every moment he delayed.

"You cannot go alone," Shaiara snapped, sounding really annoyed now.

"Well I'm not taking *you*!" Harrier snarled back. He tapped the *shotor* on its shoulder to urge it to its feet. He'd never actually tried to cast one of these spells and then see how long he could ignore it; he was starting to get a headache and he felt a sense of driving urgency that felt as if it would tip over into panic at any moment if he didn't *get going*.

Shaiara reached out and snatched the *shotor's* bridle-rope from his hand. "And why do you not wish me to ride with you in pursuit of these sun-touched fools?" she asked dangerously.

“Look,” Harrier said desperately. “We can’t win any of the battles, but we have to win the war—and that means not letting Ahairan have innocent lives, or abandoning people if there’s a chance you can save them, or letting her take people you love as hostages and that’s why you have to stay here—because I can’t stand watching the Isvaieni die but I think I *really* wouldn’t be able to stand watching you tortured to death.”

Shaiara stepped back, dropping the lead-rope, a look of shock on her face. Harrier couldn’t stop to think about what he’d just said—he couldn’t *think*—so he grabbed up the trailing rein and turned the *shotor*’s head toward the open desert, tapping it across the shoulders until it and the five he was leading moved into an inelegant trot.

Sixteen



Chasing Death

ONCE HE WAS moving, Harrier's head cleared a bit and the feeling of panic subsided. He knew exactly where to go. The Wild Magic's pull was like the feeling he had of always knowing where Armethalieh was—but he never felt a driving bone-deep urgency to get to Armethalieh as fast as he possibly could. Reluctantly, he let his *shotor* drop back to a fast walk. Nothing would be gained by killing the poor beast. The Armethaliehans might not be dead yet—he didn't think they could be, or the Finding Spell wouldn't have worked—but if Ahairan meant to kill them, it wouldn't matter how much—or how little—of a head start on him they had. All Harrier was really hoping to do was to get them back before the *desert* killed them.

He'd been riding for only about half an hour, when he heard sounds of pursuit. The desert was quiet enough that he could still hear the sounds of the encampment at his back, and over that, he could hear the sound of sand squeaking, the creaking of wood and leather, the rattle of a (precious and hoarded) quiverful of spears. He glanced back. Ciniran, Larasan, and Thadnat—and three of the Young Hunters, Luru of the Kadyastar, Suram of the Kareggi, and Hingi of the Lanzanur—were approaching at a brisk trot, obviously intending to come with him. Harrier wanted to stop and argue with them, to tell them to go back, to . . . he wasn't sure what. It wasn't possible, any more than it was possible to turn away from the call drawing him south and east. *South and east. Exactly the direction those idiots don't want to go, because Eugens said that Lord Felocan's stupid plan was to head for the Iteru-cities, so he should have gone due west to strike the Border Road—and he may be an arrogant pig-headed Noble out for what he can get, but I'm damned sure he knows east from west and which way the String of Pearls should be.*

Realizing that wherever the refugees were going it wasn't in the direction that they thought promised them safety added urgency to the pull of the Finding Spell. When Ciniran drew abreast of him, Harrier didn't bother to say all the things he was thinking. He just tossed her the lead-rope for the spare animals and urged his mount to a faster pace.



BY the time the sun had cleared the horizon, there were tracks visible ahead of him in the sand. They were heading out of the *regh* into the soft and shifting sand of the *erg*. The going was slower and more dangerous. Dunes could shift at a moment's notice; sand could drown someone as easily as Great Ocean could. And beyond those practical fears, anything at all could hide in soft sand, from Sandwalkers to all the species of Demonic bug that Ahairan seemed to take such joy in creating. Harrier wondered sometimes if making monsters entertained her. He wondered where she went to get the creatures she turned into monsters, or if she just . . . made them up. And all the time, the Wild Magic was urging him to *hurry, hurry, hurry*, until he hardly noticed that he'd urged his *shotor* to a fast trot again.

The sand here at this hour was as white and cold as moonlight, and for a short while—before the sun climbed too high—the tracks five *shotors* had left would be easy to follow. Harrier didn't need them and couldn't read the stories they held—Shaiara had told the truth when she said he was no tracker—but it was obvious even to him that the animals he was following were walking. The Armethaliehans might have been able to steal *shotors* and even ride them, but they couldn't get them to run. Harrier wasn't thinking now about anything but his need to *reach them*, because the pull of the Finding Spell was stronger than ever.

"There, Harrier—see?" Ciniran said softly.

He looked up. They were just cresting another dune, and even though he knew his *shotor* was as sure-footed as, well, a *shotor*, he couldn't keep from watching the ground on the treacherous slope as if paying attention would make a difference to its footing. It was already hot enough to be uncomfortable out here. Not if you were taking it slow and easy, but they weren't. He needed to force himself to slow down, because he was the one setting the pace.

Then he saw where Ciniran was pointing. At the edge of the horizon—already indistinct with heat-shimmer—he could just see a small cluster of mounted figures. He urged his *shotor* down the far side of the dune as fast as it would go, and when they reached the firmer sand again, he goaded it until it ran flat out.

How far away were they? Distance in the desert was impossible to judge. The horizon might be five miles or fifty or a hundred miles away and still look the same, and the shimmering of the heat-haze kept him from being able to judge distance by the sizes of the figures. He wished he'd told Ciniran to wait here, told all of them to wait. He was sure he was going to kill the poor beast he was riding, and it wasn't fair . . .

Harrier had closed perhaps half the distance to the Armethaliehans when suddenly the sand somewhere in front of them seemed to explode. Jets of sand hung in the air as if sand was water as the Sandwalker lurched up out of its hidden burrow, the morning sun shining down on its black carapace. *Run, damn you, run*, Harrier thought desperately. If the Armethaliehans ran in their direction, they could sacrifice the remounts they'd brought—because Sandwalkers would rather have *shotors* than people—and they might be able to get away. If they'd just run . . .

And they *did* run, but none of them ran anywhere *useful*. He heard the distant *shotors*' squeals of terror and saw a riderless *shotor* running free—straight south—and another two galloping eastward with riders in their saddles. Those two had been fortunate enough—apparently—to be farthest away from the Sandwalker when it surfaced, or to have better animals, or both. *Three*, his mind supplied. *There should be five. Where . . .?*

Suddenly he saw one of the riders fall from the saddle. The wind whipped her *chadar* away and he saw a flash of bright hair. Vianse Pallocons. The fall saved both her and her *shotor*—unburdened, it was fast enough to escape—and the Sandwalker was more interested in killing *shotors* right now than women. It turned away from her and scuttled across the sand, heading for the nearest remaining animal. Fast as a terrified *shotor* was, this one was weighed down with the burden of a rider, and the Sandwalker was faster. It reached its prey and lunged at it, knocking the rider from the saddle with its improbable crablike claws as it devoured the *shotor* in only a few bites.

Harrier scanned the sand for the other downed rider—because one *shotor* had been running free—and didn't see them. Then he saw that the last of the five *shotors* was still much too close to the Sandwalker. And he saw why.

It was carrying double.

"No," he said under his breath. Waste and stupidity and idiocy and it was going to kill them and there was *nothing he could do about it*. He was doing everything he

could to force his *shotor* forward as fast as possible when every instinct in its tiny brain said “flee” and he was still too far away to help.

All he could do was watch.

The Sandwalker turned away from the remains of its feast—he could see the blood on the sand—and scuttled toward the last fleeing *shotor*, its barbed tail curled high over its back. The *shotor* knew it was being chased, but it was exhausted. It had probably been carrying double from the beginning. It wasn’t fast enough. Harrier saw it sprawl sideways, falling, as the Sandwalker grabbed it by a hind leg. There was another fountain of sand. When the sand fell to the ground again, the Sandwalker, the *shotor*, and the *shotor*’s two riders were simply . . . gone.

His heart was hammering and the wind was rushing past his face. Harrier didn’t know if there was a spell to make a *shotor* run flat out into danger, but if there was, he must have figured out how to cast it, because it ran onward as fast as he could possibly hope. When he reached the body lying on the sand—Missress Pallocons—the compulsion to Find left him so abruptly that he nearly fell from the saddle before he could get his *shotor* to kneel. If he’d only been faster—if the Armethaliehans had only been smarter—if they hadn’t run at all . . .

“He left me!” Missress Pallocons said, struggling to her knees and gasping for breath. “He left me to die!”

“You aren’t dead,” Harrier snapped. “Stay here.” He turned and ran on toward the body lying in the center of the patch of blood-soaked sand.

“Don’t leave me! Don’t you dare leave me!” Missress Pallocons shrieked after him.

The man who lay there was Master Froilax. Harrier knelt beside him. Ciniran and the others were just riding up; they passed Missress Pallocons to join him. Harrier saw that Ciniran had dropped the lead-rope on the remounts—no sense in bringing the other *shotors* with them if they’d just be bait to draw the Sandwalker’s attention. Harrier held up his hand. Ciniran tossed him a waterskin.

“Follow Lord Felocan,” he said. “He can’t keep his *shotor* running for long.”

“He will leave tracks a blind dog could follow,” Ciniran answered. “Is—?”

“The Sandwalker’s gone. I suppose it wasn’t very hungry.” Harrier lifted Master Froilax’s head onto his knee. “Here. I brought water.”

He’d seen Bisochim successfully Heal men who’d had both legs severed only a few inches below the hips. Even now he would have been willing to try to Heal Master Froilax. He thought the others would probably agree to share spell-price and spell-cost—if he asked, for him and for no other reason—but it would simply be too dangerous for all of them to be left drained and weak. But there was no point in even trying. The Sandwalker’s claws had done worse than simply shear Master Froilax’s legs from his body. He dribbled as much as water he dared into the man’s open mouth, but it only made him cough.

“Didn’t . . . tell us,” Master Froilax gasped.

“I was going to,” Harrier said quietly. “You were gone when I got there.”

“Doesn’t . . . hurt . . . at all,” Master Froilax panted, laboring for air. His legs were crushed into a red ruin, and one of the Sandwalker’s claws had sheared open his belly. He didn’t seem to have noticed. “Must not be . . . Arhos . . . Leiled . . . are they . . .”

“Fine,” Harrier said steadily. “They’re both fine.”

Master Froilax coughed wetly and dragged in a deep lungful of air. “Tell Handene,” he said full-voiced, and died.

Harrier laid Master Froilax’s head down on the sand again and got to his feet. “I need to—” he said.

“We shall make sure there is nothing here for Ahairan to use, Harrier,” Thadnat said. He looked at Harrier curiously. “Those names he spoke . . .?”

“I think Handene’s his wife. Arhos and Leiled Oriadan . . . they were the ones the Sandwalker took down into its burrow. I should go see if—”

“Harrier, they are *dead!*” Ciniran said fiercely. “A sandspill will kill even without *atish’ban* creatures to aid it! We must go—now—to trace the last of these sun-touched city-dwellers and bring him back before we must instead make his body another offering to Ahairan.”

Harrier winced, hearing the phrase, but he knew most of the Isvaieni used it. Grim as it was, it was better to talk about making “an offering to Ahairan” than to say flat out that when your husband or your sister or your child died, the most important duty you could perform was to cut his or her body into the smallest pieces possible so that it didn’t come back as a Shambler to kill you and everyone you knew. He turned to walk back to where he’d left Missress Pallocons and his *shotor*, but when he saw his *shotor* getting to its knees with her in the saddle he ran instead. Missress Pallocons was beating at the *shotor*’s shoulders with the waterskin he’d left her, and it was on its feet and moving before he could reach it. She turned it away from him, goading it to a trot, but he ran to intercept it and lunged up to grab its bridle. Once he did that, it stopped in confusion, giving him the chance to reach out and twist his hand into a handful of Missress Pallocons’s robes and yank her out of the saddle. He knew that she hit the ground with a thump, but he really didn’t care at the moment: his *shotor* was skittish at its mistreatment and their remounts were gone and he was going to have to ride double on their search for Lord Felocan and all the way back to camp and there were a lot of things he wasn’t happy about right now.

He’d barely gotten his *shotor* to kneel again when Missress Pallocons leaped onto his back, clawing at his eyes and screaming phrases that Da would have whaled *him* for knowing. A moment later he felt her torn free.

“Thanks,” he said to Ciniran.

It took both Ciniran and Larasan to hold Missress Pallocons as she snarled and struggled. Harrier bent over and picked up the waterskin from the sand. Empty. He tucked it into his sash. “What did you think you were *doing?*” he demanded.

“You were going to leave me! I know you were!” Missress Pallocons said defiantly. Liapha—or someone—had actually managed to comb her hair out. It was a color somewhere between gold and copper. He was sure whoever’d managed that had told her to braid it, too, but she hadn’t. It tumbled free and shining all the way to her waist, obviously freshly washed. Harrier actually found himself wondering when and how she’d managed that.

“I chased you all the way across the desert. I wasn’t going to leave you after I’d done that.” He caught Ciniran’s eye and shrugged. Ciniran let go of one of Missress Pallocons’s arms, and Missress Pallocons yanked her arm free of Larasan’s grip with a little huff of exasperation.

“You’re angry with me,” she said, in a small plaintive voice. “I know you are.”

If Harrier was angry with anyone, it was with Lord Felocan, who’d almost certainly been the one responsible for dragging all of them out here and getting three of them killed. “Go find your *chadar*—your headscarf—and bring it back here,” he said briefly. “Then we’ll go.”

“Give me yours,” she wheedled, coiling a lock of her hair around her finger and gazing up at him through her lashes.

“No,” Harrier said simply. “Go on. It’s over there.” He pointed.

“I’m afraid. Go with me?” she begged, her eyes wide and terrified.

“No,” he said again. “Go and get it. And if you take too long, I won’t leave without you—but I’ll make you walk.”

Her pretended fear vanished like the flame of a torch thrust into water. She glared at him furiously. Somehow she’d managed to get a *geschak*, and now her hand twitched toward it. Ciniran slapped her hand away—hard—and plucked the little knife from her sash.

“I shall get the *chadar*, Harrier,” Ciniran said, walking off.

“That’s my knife,” Missress Pallocons said sullenly. “She’s stealing it.”

“It isn’t yours. You stole it first,” Harrier said, feeling wearily as if he was talking to a very small child. He was pretty sure that whatever position Missress Pallocons occupied in Lord Felocan’s household, it wasn’t as either his private secretary or chief steward. All things considered, he was just as glad that she wasn’t going to be

sitting behind him carrying a knife.

When Ciniran returned with the *chadar*, Mistress Pallocons didn't want to put it on. Normally Harrier wouldn't have wasted time or energy in arguing with her, but the last thing they needed just now was to have her sun-touched. It had taken him and the Isvaieni two hours to find the missing Armethaliehans and it would take them twice that long to get back to the camp once they'd caught up with Lord Felocan. If they even found him alive.

"If." *If only I'd gone back to their tent as soon as the Black Dog attack was over. Maybe I wouldn't have been in time to keep them from leaving, but I would only have been an hour or so behind them, not three or four or five. I could have caught up to them long before they reached the dunes and the Sandwalker. The others would still be alive.*

Mistress Pallocons didn't want to ride behind him either, but at that point Harrier was finished arguing. He simply swung into the saddle and prepared to give his *shotor* the command to rise. Vianse Pallocons scrambled up behind him without further complaint.



HARRIER and Ciniran rode side by side at the head of their tiny party. Now that the Finding Spell had run its course, Ciniran was the one who had to follow Lord Felocan's trail, while Harrier kept watch for Sandwalkers. He wasn't reassured by Tiercel's theory—because it *was* only a theory—that each of the creatures had a large hunting area so they weren't likely to run into a second one. It might not be true. And there were plenty of other things out here that could come after them.

If they hadn't been in the *erg*, they would have been able to see Lord Felocan even if he was miles away, but the dunes blocked the sight-lines. They couldn't split up and have one person ride up to the top of one of the dunes to look for him because that would be too dangerous. And they couldn't all ride up to the top of one of the dunes together and look for fear that the amount of sand they shifted would bury the trail to the point where Ciniran couldn't find it again.

It had been just before dawn when he'd set out—about halfway through the Tenth Hour of Night—and a little more than four hours later—what they called in the south the Third Hour of Day—when he and the Isvaieni had first reached the people they were following. None of them wished to push the *shotors* in the steadily-increasing heat, and Harrier needed them to go slowly so he could search the sand ahead and on all sides for danger. For all these reasons it was nearly another hour and a half before they finally caught sight of Lord Felocan.

"What is he doing?" Thadnat asked in bewilderment, bringing his *shotor* to a stop.

"He does not seem to be doing anything," Hingi answered reasonably.

It was true. They'd followed his trail around the bottom of the last dune and found themselves at the edge of a broad flat area bordered on all sides by sloping dune hills. The ripple-pattern the wind left on the sand ahead was almost identical to the pattern the ocean waves left on the fine sand of the shallows; it was broken only by the faint indentations of a *shotor's* plodding tracks crossing the flat expanse of sand in a straight line. At the end of the line of tracks the *shotor* itself stood, its back to them, head down, apparently exhausted. Lord Felocan sat slumped in its saddle.

"Lord Felocan!" Harrier shouted. "We've come to bring you back to the camp! We've brought water!"

There was no reaction to his hail from either man or *shotor*.

"Sun-touched," Ciniran said after a moment. "I will lead his poor beast back here, Harrier. Then we may go."

Before Harrier could argue the point Ciniran had goaded her *shotor* across the sand. It was probably just as fast for her to do it as for Harrier to convince Mistress Pallocons to dismount while he went and did it. He didn't want to ride out to Lord Felocan with her riding pillion because he'd started to form the theory that she'd been acting so strangely because she hated Lord Felocan and had been forced to come with him, and had been hoping that Lord Felocan would die before he could be rescued. Harrier decided that when they got back he'd have to ask either Shaiara or Ciniran to tell Mistress Pallocons that she didn't have to stay with Lord Felocan if she didn't want to.

Then Ciniran reached the other *shotor*. Harrier saw her reach for its bridle-rope—

And Lord Felocan jerked upright in his saddle, reaching for her as quickly as an adder struck and grabbing her by the throat. He pulled her across her saddle and her *shotor* bolted from beneath her. She scrambled helplessly at the wrists that held her, and for one sickening moment Ciniran hung suspended by the hands around her throat until Lord Felocan's *shotor* slumped to its knees and fell to its side, dead. Lord Felocan and Ciniran tumbled to the ground.

Harrier had started forward the instant Lord Felocan began to move. Mistress Pallocons shrieked—either in surprise or anger—but her cries were drowned out by the shouts of the other Isvaieni.

Thadnat and Larasan both passed him as he galloped forward. Neither bothered to wait for their *shotors* to kneel when they reached the bodies tangled on the sand. Harrier saw the flash of Thadnat's *awardan* as he cut at Lord Felocan—no, at Lord Felocan's *body*, because no matter what Thadnat did, the grip of its hands on Ciniran's throat did not relax, and the body did not bleed. Only when Thadnat had chopped through its arms was Larasan able to pull Ciniran away, and by that time, Hingi had joined them, helping her pull the severed limbs loose. Harrier took the time to force his *shotor* to kneel, because Luru and Suram were behind him, but he didn't trust Mistress Pallocons not to try to ride off again.

"Heal her!" Larasan begged, clutching Ciniran's body across her lap. Her face was twisted with anguish. "Harrier! Heal her!"

Harrier knelt down in front of Larasan. One look at Ciniran's face told him everything he needed to know. "I cannot Heal the dead, Larasan," he said softly. He was cold, shaking, sick with rage and loss and grief. *How can I tell Shaiara that I let her die?* This was too much. This was—

"How many more must die before you realize your fight is hopeless?" a voice behind him asked.

This wasn't grief. Not just grief. He drew a deep breath and rose fluidly to his feet, drawing both his Selken blades as he turned.

Mistress Pallocons stood beside his *shotor*, running her *chadar* through her hands. Her hair stirred in the hot wind; she gazed at him, head tilted, a small smile on her lips. She reached out—casually—and stroked the *shotor's* neck. Harrier could see its eyes, maddened and white-rimmed with terror. How could he have missed what she'd become? How could she have been Overshadowed by Ahairan without him knowing? He could sense the Taint in her now—so awful it was an effort for him just to stand here. And no one could sense it but him. The two Isvaieni behind her—it—took a step forward. "Get away from her," he said quietly. Luru and Suram looked at his face and hurried to obey, pulling their *shotors* with them.

"How many? How many? How many more must die?" Mistress Pallocons—or Ahairan—singsonged, swaying from side to side. Her eyes never left his face.

Tell the truth? Tell a lie? Somehow Harrier knew instinctively that neither one was a good idea. "If you don't know the answer to that, you aren't very powerful after all," he said.

And as suddenly as the Demonic presence had descended, it was gone. Mistress Pallocons—wholly herself again—sprawled on her back on the sand. Harrier's *shotor*, freed from Ahairan's spell, scrambled to its feet with a bleat of terror and bolted, squalling in panic as it ran. She pushed herself up onto her elbows and began to laugh hysterically. "Doomed! All of you! All of us! You will all be her creatures in the end! Just as I—Just as I—"

A spear flew past Harrier's shoulder, burying itself in Vianse Pallocons's throat and pinning her body to the sand. He turned around. Larasan was standing behind him, a second spear in her hand, her eyes murderous.

"All right," Harrier said wearily. "Let's do what we need to do here. And go."



THADNAT and Larasan rode double on the return trip so that Harrier could have a *shotor* to himself. They could hope that the *shotors* wandering around out here—his, Ciniran’s, the two surviving ones of the five the Armethaliehans had stolen, the ones they’d brought as spare remounts—would seek out the encampment when they smelled water, but it was much more likely that they’d be eaten by something. Harrier forced himself to concentrate on getting the rest of them back to the camp alive. He’d have plenty of time later to think about the high cost of his stupidity.

It was nearly midday when they reached the encampment. It was still in the same place it had been when he’d left this morning—Shaiara must have given orders for them not to move out until he returned. He left his *shotor* to be unsaddled by the others—something he wouldn’t normally do, but his business was urgent—and went to find Bisochim. He’d probably be with Saravasse, and Saravasse was easy to spot. She watched him approach, her golden eyes unblinking. He knew she’d seen them ride up, and seen who wasn’t with them. He was grateful that she didn’t ask where Ciniran was.

Ciniran.

His friend, his ally, and losing her made Harrier ache. She’d made him welcome from the moment he and Tiercel had arrived at Abi’Abadshar, teased him for what he didn’t know about Isvaieni ways, marveled at his stories of Armethalieh, never refused to accompany the two of them no matter where they ended up going, never said their impossible task was impossible . . .

The worst of it was that his grief at losing her was mixed with relief. It was horrible that she was dead, and Harrier knew it was his fault, but he didn’t think he could have lived with letting her die while Ahairan told him all he had to do was surrender to save her life.

He would have sacrificed her. He thought he would have. At least now he’d never have to know.

“Mistress Pallocons was Overshadowed by Ahairan,” he said bluntly, stopping in front of her. “It—She—It came and went. I think she must have been Ahairan’s . . . creature since Akazidas’ Iteru. And I couldn’t tell, except when she was . . . there.”

Bisochim had been sitting beneath the shelter of Saravasse’s half-furled wing. He got to his feet now and regarded Harrier with worry and fear. “You say that Ahairan entered into the body of one of the northerners?” he asked.

“Yes,” Harrier said. “I need to know—” He broke off, thinking of Eugens, and shuddered before he could stop himself. “Are they all like that? All Tainted? Can you tell? Can you undo it?” He tried to remember if Bisochim had been near any of the northerners, and he couldn’t. No, wait. He’d been in Fannas’s tent when Magistrate Perizel and Lord Felocan had come in. Was that close enough to know?

“I would know—as did you—when Ahairan was present,” Bisochim said, after a long pause. “Harrier, I Healed all of them. I Sensed nothing in any of them then—even the one you call Mistress Pallocons. I would have thought . . .” His voice trailed off. “I could set wards and bindings about those who yet remain. I cannot say to you that such a spell would work. Nor would its weaving outlast my life.”

“No, no, of course not,” Harrier muttered. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “Ciniran’s dead,” he said. “They’re all dead. They stole food, and they ran, and I went to bring them back, and they’re dead, and I lost all the *shotors* . . .”

“Harrier,” Saravasse said gently, “Go to your tent. Go and lie down. Rest. You did all that you could.”

Her words struck him as preposterous, and Harrier wanted to laugh, but he knew that if he started laughing he just wouldn’t stop. *Did all I could? It wasn’t enough. I haven’t done enough from the very beginning—if I had, none of us would be in this mess now . . .*

He mumbled something—he didn’t know what—and turned around and staggered off.



THE last twelve hours had been horrible: shock alternating with nerve-wracking waiting. Of course it’d been worse for Harrier, but that didn’t mean that it’d been good for *anyone*.

Tiercel had been the last person Healed, and being Healed by Bisochim was still as unpleasant as Tiercel remembered—if you defined “unpleasant” as a stabbing headache and half an hour of uncontrollable vomiting. He was almost convinced he’d rather have had the wound-fever than its cure. The only bright side to things was that it was night camp, not midday camp, so it was dark and there was enough water available for him to drink as much as he wanted.

When the nausea finally passed off, the only thing he was thinking about was getting to his tent and sleeping, and hoping that Harrier really had been diplomatic enough with Magistrate Perizel and Lord Felocan. And he got there and Shaiara told him that all the Armethaliehans but Kave, Eugens, and Magistrate Perizel had run off, and that they’d stolen most of the food that wasn’t spell-sealed, and that Harrier had gone after them.

“You just let him go alone?” Tiercel had asked, stunned.

“He said he would not allow me to ride by his side,” Shaiara had answered, her dark eyes wide and unreadable. “He said that it would slay his heart did he by his action allow one whom he loved to fall into the hands of Ahairan.”

“I . . . Oh.”

Tiercel wondered if Shaiara had misunderstood what Harrier had said—or if Harrier had meant to say it. He decided that she probably hadn’t misunderstood him—but that it was something that Harrier would rather not have anyone know, himself included. At least Shaiara had sent Ciniran and whoever else she could grab in half a chime after him. So he wasn’t quite alone.

After that Tiercel was far too keyed-up to sleep, even exhausted as he was. During the long nerve-wracking hours of waiting (once more) for news, he did what Harrier had meant to do: explain everything about their situation to Kave and Eugens and Magistrate Perizel. Everything they told him in return terrified him, because those things simply weren’t true.

They told him all the things that Mistress Pallocons had overheard as she’d wandered around the camp. And Tiercel supposed Mistress Pallocons might have wandered around the camp—no one would have stopped her—but she couldn’t have heard what she’d told them she had. They *didn’t* all have stockpiles of food concealed in their tents. They *weren’t* within a day’s ride of the Iteru-cities. The Iteru-cities *weren’t* intact. The wells along the Border Road weren’t intact either: if the wells and oases of the Isvai had gone dry, the wells of the Border Road certainly had.

Tiercel didn’t know why Mistress Pallocons would say things like that. Not until the Isvaieni with Harrier got back.

By the time Harrier got there, stumbling into his tent and collapsing without a word to anyone, Larasan and Thadnat had already arrived. They sat before their Ummara and told her that Ciniran was dead, that all the northerners she’d sent them to find were dead, that they’d lost twelve *shotors*, and that Pallocons had been Ahairan’s creature from the beginning.

It took Tiercel hours after that—questioning the four Isvaieni, since he didn’t want to wake Harrier—questioning Kave and Eugens and Magistrate Perizel—talking to Bisochim and Saravasse—before he and Shaiara understood as much of the story as Tiercel thought anyone ever would. The three surviving Armethaliehans weren’t as horrified as he and everyone else was at the idea that Ahairan might be able to possess any of them at will, but they were horrified enough.

“But . . . Lord Tiercel . . . you have to do something,” Magistrate Perizel pleaded. “The idea that . . . that my actions might not be my own . . .” her voice trailed off,

and she looked down at her hands. "And nobody would know," she said quietly.

"Harrier would. Bisochim would," Tiercel said. It was small comfort, but it was all he had to offer. "That's probably why Ahairan was so careful about when she possessed Mistress Pallocons."

"And why she was in such a hurry to get away," Eugens said in disgust.

Tiercel didn't answer that. He was only grateful that whatever Ahairan had been planning, it hadn't succeeded. If it had, Harrier would be her prisoner now—at the very least. At worst, he'd be the whatever-she-needed to create a new race of Demons, and she'd have no need to leave the rest of them alive after that.

Tiercel didn't enjoy the thought of trying to explain something this complicated to the rest of the Isvaieni, especially since he wasn't sure he really understood it himself. He suspected that was the reason Shaiara had given the order to break out the rest of the hoarded food supplies that they weren't saving for Saphthiruk Oasis. Between the flour and vegetable paste for thickening, the spices for savor, and all the extra meat from the animals the Black Dogs had killed, not only was the broth almost stew, but there was a lot of it.

Of course the gossip about the day's events had already made the rounds of the camp before the evening meeting. If the previous night's council had been well attended, tonight's was jammed. Everyone had an opinion, which Tiercel's detailed explanation did nothing to head off.

Ummara Kataduk presented the opinion of at least a third of the *Ummarai* when she said that the easiest and safest thing would be just to kill the surviving northerners. Not only were they implicated in the theft of the food, they might also be pawns of the Demon. Zanattar flatly refused to agree with his mother's position: the Lanzanur had survived by the mercy of the Wildmage Harrier, and this placed upon the Lanzanur the obligation to show mercy to those under the Wildmage Harrier's protection.

Ummara Liapha said that she was certain they would all do just as they pleased, but no good had ever come of selling the calf before it was foaled, nor of throwing out the whole bushel of dates just because one was spoiled.

Ummara Kinaraf said that the Laghamba had survived, if they had not prospered, beneath the counsel of Wildmages and northerners. Five had stolen food. Five were dead. If the Wildmages and Tiercel Northerner said that the other three northerners were neither thieves nor Shadow-touched, the Laghamba would accept this word—knowing, *Ummara* Kinaraf added warningly, that should an evil hour come, the rules that Harrier Blue-Robe had set out for the tribes to follow would lie equally upon the shoulders of all.

Ummara Fannas said he had no word to add to that of the Laghamba, for he had eaten a good dinner and looked to eat better when they arrived at Saphthiruk Oasis.

By the time everyone had gotten the chance to have his or her say—more for the chance to state their position publicly either to brag or complain than to persuade anyone here to change their minds—the meeting had gone on for hours, and had ended very much the way Shaiara had told Tiercel it would when they went in to it: Eugens and Kave and Magistrate Perizel would be allowed to live, and Harrier would be expected to treat them no differently than he would treat anyone else.

"He wouldn't do that," Tiercel said to Shaiara, as they were walking back.

"Not even this Eugens, who is of his blood?" she asked.

Tiercel knew that in the south, becoming a Wildmage meant severing all ties with family. Shaiara knew the customs were different in the north, but she was suspicious of what acknowledging ties of kinship might mean for Harrier. "Not even for me," Tiercel said ruefully. "And no. Not for Eugens, either. If Gens did something wrong, and Harrier didn't think he could be fair, he'd tell someone else to decide. You. Or Kamar. Or Zanattar. Or Liapha."

"He would hate the one who brought justice down upon the head of his kin," Shaiara said slowly.

"If it was fair, I don't think so," Tiercel said slowly. "He'd be more likely to hate Gens for breaking the rules. But it won't happen," he added confidently.

"Sell the calf after it is foaled," Shaiara answered.



WHEN Harrier woke, the light coming into the tent was dim with evening, and the air was cool. He sat up groggily, and it was several minutes before he registered that it was evening, that he'd returned at midday, that he'd slept the whole day away and the camp still hadn't moved. He had a vague memory of making his way back to his tent, of stripping off his boots and his swordbelts, of lying down. Nothing more. It was only while he was in the middle of reaching for his boots that he registered the presence of someone else in the tent. He had to blink several times to focus his eyes before he realized it was Eugens.

"I'm sorry," Eugens said in a low voice when he saw Harrier looking at him. Eugens was sitting on the carpet a few feet away from Harrier's sleeping-mat. Harrier wondered how long he'd been sitting there. "Light, Har, I'm . . . I'm *sorry*. I didn't . . . I didn't *think*."

"My fault," Harrier said roughly. "I should have had you guarded."

He saw Eugens wince at the harsh truth. "You shouldn't have to guard people whose lives you've saved to keep them from stealing from you. And . . . Is it true about Vianse? Tyr said—"

"She was Overshadowed by Ahairan," Harrier finished wearily. "Yes."

"I'm sorry," Eugens said again. "For lying to you. For everything. They wanted us to come with them—she said she'd overheard some of the women saying you were heading away from the *Iteru*-cities. Lord Felocan said there'd be water there. Supplies."

"They were heading in the opposite direction," Harrier said. There was a moment of silence. "Why didn't the three of you go with them?"

"Helafin—Magistrate Perizel—she thought she should stay. Said it was her responsibility, even if you didn't think so. Kave said he'd stay if she did, and . . . I'm your brother, Har. Couldn't just go off and leave you, could I?"

Harrier tossed his boots aside and stumbled over to kneel awkwardly at his brother's side. Eugens put his arms around him and Harrier hugged him very hard. "You jackass. We're all going to die here. You know that, right?" Harrier said.

"Yeah," Eugens said shakily. "But Naneida and the kids are home and safe. Guess I might as well die here with you as out on the desert with a bunch of other jackasses."

"Guess you're going to get your chance," Harrier answered, sitting back.

"Yeah," Eugens said. "Uh, your, uh, Shaiara, she said I should tell you when you woke up there was food waiting for you."

Harrier nodded, and went to get his boots. It was silly to dread the thought of seeing Shaiara again. By now there'd been plenty of time for the others to have told her about Ciniran's death. He was a little surprised, when he and Eugens came out of the tent to sit on the carpet, to see that only Raffa, Natha, and Narkil were there. Shaiara, Kamar, Tiercel, and Larasan, and Thadnat were all absent.

"They have gone to the Council, Harrier," Raffa said when she saw him. "Shaiara said you were *not* to go, did you awaken while it was still going on."

"What about . . .?" Harrier pointed toward the second tent.

"The other two northerners have gone to wait in the tents of the Kadyastar," Raffa said simply. She turned to the pot on the fire, and ladled a mug full of its contents. "Now you will eat."

Under most circumstances, "eat" was an overstatement, but tonight, the contents of the mug Raffa handed him was actually thick. It even contained scraps of meat.

“What?” Harrier said in confusion, after he’d taken a sip.

“It was Shaiara’s word that the stores of flour should be added to the soup, and that it should be made rich, and that all should receive a double portion. If Ahairan wishes to send her creatures to do our slaughtering, it would be foolish of us to squander her bounty,” Raffa answered, her voice rich with irony.

Harrier made a rude noise. He supposed that was one way of looking at the deaths of all the animals the Black Dogs had slaughtered last night. And oddly, after two full mugs of thick soup, he actually felt full—though not so full that he wasn’t careful to wash dinner down with a mug or two of water, until the last of the soup had been rinsed from his tankard. By the time he was finished with his meal, Shaiara, Tiercel, and the other three Nalzindar were returning to the tent.



WHEN they got back, Harrier was awake and Eugens was sitting with him. Luru and Kadil brought Kave and Magistrate Perizel back as soon as Liapha returned to the Kadyastar tents, and once they were there, the absence of Ciniran was an aching void.

“I should have—” Harrier said abruptly.

“Do not think you might take the day and the manner of her death from her,” Shaiara answered sharply.

Harrier got to his feet and walked off, and after a moment, Shaiara got to her feet and followed. Eugens stared after them, then glanced toward Tiercel and stayed where he was. Tiercel stared at nothing, grateful beyond words that Harrier was preoccupied right now. He didn’t want Harrier looking at him and asking him what he was thinking. He was thinking too many things. Terrible things.

Tomorrow they’d pack up the camp and keep going. In another day—or three, or five—they’d reach Sapthiruk Oasis.

And then what?

No help was coming from the north. He glanced at Magistrate Perizel. The Commission had already been out of touch with Armethalieh for two or three moonturns, and if Magistrate Vaunnel was going to investigate—or notify Queen Vairindiel—she already would have. Dragonbond Elven Mages could be here in less than a day. So they probably weren’t coming at all. Tiercel realized that he’d been thinking—even before Ancaladar had been taken from him—that he wasn’t the only one who had to be responsible for this. All along he’d thought, in the back of his mind, that Armethalieh could take over if he failed. That Karahelanderialigor could take over if he failed. That *Harrier* could take over if he failed. That his failure just meant that the Eternal Light would send someone else to take over the job of destroying the Shadow Reborn.

And it wasn’t true.

If Bisochim couldn’t destroy Ahairan—and he couldn’t—Harrier certainly couldn’t, Knight-Mage or not. Now that Tiercel had spent more time talking to Magistrate Perizel, he really understood just how little idea they’d have in Armethalieh about what to do about a Demon, and Lord Felocan couldn’t be the only one who’d think it would be a good idea to just *bargain* with her. As for the Elves, they were terrific people, but they’d known this was going to happen since *before he was born*, and they hadn’t done anything about it except wait for him to show up so they could *not tell him anything*, and he just couldn’t say “*oh, it will be okay, another High-Mage-Champion-of-the-Light will be born*” because even if he and Harrier and Bisochim all died without falling to the Dark, Ahairan was going to get what she needed somewhere else, or go off and hide, or both, and okay, maybe another High-Mage-Champion-of-the-Light *would* be born—*eventually*—but that just meant there’d be another war like the one that had ended in the Great Flowering, and Tiercel knew more than anyone outside the Elven Lands about what that war—and the Great War, and the First Endarkened War—had been like, and the idea of there being another one like them made him want to *cut his throat right now*.

Because if there was another war—in ten years, or a century, or even *ten* centuries—the Creatures of the Light were going to lose. All along Harrier had been saying that he was no Kellen the Poor Orphan Boy. And he was right. He wasn’t. Harrier wasn’t a Kellen, and as for Tiercel, he wasn’t an Idalia, or a Jermayan, or whoever he was supposed to be playing in this unfunny farce, and Tiercel doubted very much there would be any *more* heroes around whenever Ahairan decided to destroy them than there were now.

He was scared to death.

Harrier had said—all along—that all they had to do was survive long enough for someone else to notice that Ahairan was loose, because if they could manage to do that, someone else could stop her. He’d clung to that one fact, using it to keep himself—to keep all of them—alive for as long as he could.

But it wasn’t true.

It wasn’t even that no help was coming.

It was that there was no help *out there*.

Anywhere.

Seventeen



Catch Fire, Draw Flame

EACH DAY'S DAWN was like new chains of iron bound about his soul, and that none of the men and women in Bisochim's care looked upon him with reproach was a knife in his heart. Even the northern Wildmage who had once gazed at him with eyes of hatred and loathing. Even the northern High Mage whose Elvenforged destiny had been to seek his death. Even they did not hate.

It was the bitterest irony to be found between Sand and Star that he longed now as ardently for death as he had once yearned for immortality. Death was easy to find upon the sands of the Isvai—never more so than now—but to accept that dark gift would doom his dearest love and the thousands of lives he held within his grasp. That the moment must inevitably come when all—Isvaieni, Saravasse, he himself—went down into death and despair was an unbearable thing, and so Bisochim sought to delay that which he yearned to embrace as ardently as other men might long for food, for water, for sleep, for the arms of a loved one. He did not seek death to escape pain, or out of fear of what Ahairan would do in the moment of her inevitable victory, or as an atonement for the blood upon his hands.

He sought death because in death he would *no longer remember what he had done*.

His every waking breath was haunted by memories of a life spent in service to arrogance and pride. Seeking to serve the Wild Magic—but only in ways that pleased him. His power had been great, his spells powerful—and so he had chosen to hide himself from the people he had been given his Three Books to serve. Instead of dedicating his life to their care, instead of rejoicing in Saravasse and their love, he had sought other matters to occupy his mind, and so arrogance had led to indolence. Instead of seeing Saravasse's arrival as a gift from the Wild Magic that would allow him to journey to the Elven Lands to place his fears and uncertainties in the hands of the Elder Kin—they of long sight and long memory—in the flower of his pride he had stolen her will and her power and used them to conjure up monsters.

And so had lost all. Happiness. Honor. Life. This long journey was only a waking death, through which he must drag himself day upon day, watching new horrors visited upon those who would not complain of them as they suffered and starved and died. The only mercy he had been granted was that he had been spared the need to watch the children of his people die.

So far.

What virtue of concealment and defense could a fortress hold when she who wished to assault it knew where it lay? When Ahairan held within the compass of her hand creatures impervious to spellcraft? If he could not turn back the Black Salaawa—or the Goblins, or the Shamblers—by spells of command, then surely Ahairan could send them against Abi'Abadshar. One hunting pack of the Black Dogs, one infestation of poison-spitting Goblins, a new-made army of the unquiet dead, could slay the precious hundreds who thought that the ancient city of the Oldest Kin was a true refuge.

And even if Ahairan sent no armies against them, in another wheel of the seasons, they would begin to starve.

He did not speak of these things save to Saravasse, and that only in the deepest hours of the night when there were no other ears to hear. He would not render the burden of any man or woman here heavier by the weight of so much as a grain of sand.

But there were days without number when the effort of remaining silent took nearly all his strength. Those days were terrible enough. Far worse were those when the temptation coiled around his heart and mind like the desert adder: to Heal his Bonded, to end her pain—

To doom them all.

He knew he must not.

But her suffering was nigh-unbearable to him, even more for the quiet grace with which she bore it, the love she showed him when his mind was so choked with horror that he could not even speak.

Better by far to slay himself, and end her suffering that way. (If only thousands would not be condemned to slow death by his actions.) If only his death would not open another door to Ahairan's victory, for Harrier of the Two Swords had said that they must all keep her mind upon them here in the Isvai, so that warning of her presence could spread itself through the north by the will of the Wild Magic.

And so Bisochim endured. Speaking little. Aware of less. Moving through the long days and longer nights in a haze of anguish, knowing that the power he had once gloried in could do nothing more than condemn his people to a long torturous dying.

And at last the Isvaieni came to Saphthruk Oasis.

Oasis it had been once, but no longer. When he had first woven his web of lies to entangle the Isvaieni, Bisochim had turned the ever-flowing desert spring into a vast lake, and caused hectares of meadow to spread themselves about it as if it were a garden of the Cold North. Now nothing remained here save the drifting sand.

But the power of a Dragonbond Mage was yet Bisochim's to command, and in the sennights of their journey to this place, Harrier of the Two Swords had said many times what he would have Saphthruk become. And so, in the cold dawn of the day after they had reached Saphthruk at last, Bisochim strode forth onto the sand and stretched out his hands. The winds rose at his command, swirling and blowing, and when they ceased to swirl and blow, he had surrounded five thousand hectares of desert with a wall of magic-fused stone thirty *trayas* thick and thirty *trayas* high—a wall taller than a dozen tall men and as wide as it was tall. It had two openings: one to the east and one to the north, each as wide as it was tall and each wide enough to allow three *shotors* to pass through it walking side-by-side.

When he had built his walls, Bisochim walked through the northern gate, onto ground swept bare by his winds, and he bespelled all that he had made. The walls of pale sandstone he warded so that no Goblin could pass through them. The ground encircled by his walls he warded so that no Goblin nor any Darkspawn creature could rise up through it. The air above the compass of the walls he warded so that no *atish'ban* creature could fly down through it, and the gateways in the walls he warded so that no *atish'ban* creature could creep in through them. And when he had done all that, Bisochim walked to the center of the land encircled by the fortress, to the place where there was no more than a scrubbed bowl in the earth where once a lake had been. And once more he stretched out his hand.

Here the water awaited his call, though its path up from the Deep Earth was choked and clogged by sifted sand. The sun moved by slow handspans across the sky as he coaxed and summoned, demanded and begged. And at last water bubbled up out of the Deep Earth, clear and pure and cold and unfailing, to make once more the great water that he had put here in the early days of his madness. Lakes and rivers and wells and springs in the farthest north and the uttermost east would fail before the

oasis at Saphthiruk would go dry again.

But it was still not enough.

Saphthiruk must become a garden to rival the gardens at Telinchechitl.

And so he turned, and walked out through the gate again.

Now came within the walls of Saphthiruk a hundred chosen Isvaieni and Harrier of the Two Swords. They brought the precious baskets of hoarded seed and grain, the baskets of hoarded desert grasses and animal dung, and tent-stakes, and hammers, and leather buckets.

As Harrier of the Two Swords entered, walking down the long passage that led through the wall, he smoothed his hand along the wall that Bisochim had crafted of sand and magic and nodded, as if he found it good. He wore the Blue Robes lightly, as if they did not weigh heavily upon him, yet Bisochim had found them always to be the heaviest of garments, as if they were woven of iron and bronze, not wool and linen.

“Let’s get to work, then,” Harrier said, looking around the vast walled space. I guess we want to plant grass around the edge of the . . . lake. Don’t know how well the rest of this stuff will grow in . . . clay.”

“Not clay alone,” Shaiara of the Nalzindar answered, gesturing to the baskets the *shotors* had carried across the distance that lay between the encampment and Saphthiruk.



BISOCHIM stood aside as they toiled, bringing water to the hard earth to soften it, digging it to loosen it, depositing their precious cargo. They began at the edge of his great water, and where they placed tufts of withered seedlings into carefully crafted mudholes, the Wild Magic brought them to life. They grew up, sent taproots questing out beneath the earth, sent up new shoots to break through the earth elsewhere, and as they did, his magic awakened the buried rootlings that remained here after the *atish’ban-khazdara’s* depredations. But grass was no test of his magic—all knew he could make the desert grass grow up as he chose—nor was it safety for his people. Twenty *trayas* from the edge of the great water, Zanattar of the Lanzanur was carefully burying dried dates. His face was turned away, but Bisochim needed no art to know what lay in Zanattar’s heart. To raise up the great trees that had once shaded Saphthiruk’s oasis, from the fruits they had managed to carry with them for so long, would be a promise tendered by the Wild Magic that the other seeds and grains they had borne with them through long privation would take root as well.

All the earth about the oasis was muddy now, and the Isvaieni toiled on, carefully piecing out the flourishing grasses to plant root-clusters in the bare spaces. Others had moved further away—under Harrier and Shaiara’s direction—marking out and preparing the ground. Here for oats and there for barley. Here would go the olive trees, there the fig trees, the *naranjes* and *limuns*, and beyond them an apple orchard.

If it could be done at all.

As Bisochim bent his spells to the work of making the date palms rise up, all who labored here beneath the desert sun stopped to watch. There was a muffled thud from the wall, and the ground trembled; Saravasse had sprung to the top of the wall to watch over him. At first there was nothing to see at all, and then—both swiftly and slowly—twelve pale green shoots rose up from the wet and richly dunged piles of heaped-up earth, rising toward the sky, spreading their wide-ribbed leaves. Darker grew the leaves, and the trunks broadened, roughened, darkened to brown. When the palms were twice the height of a tall man, Bisochim released the spell that hastened their growth and sank to his knees in the soft wet clay.

“My love!”

He heard Saravasse call out to him in alarm. Heard the sound of running feet.

“Hey,” Harrier said, kneeling before him. “Hey. You all right?”

The ways of northerner speech fell oddly upon the ear. Saravasse agreed that it was true that Northerners never said what they meant, and even though in comparison to the Elder Kin they were blunt to the point of discourtesy, one could always understand the meaning of the speech of the Elder Kin, and one could rarely understand the meaning of northerner words. But here and now, Bisochim knew that worry and concern was meant.

“I am well,” he said slowly. “I have crafted many spells today. There is still much to do.” He began to raise himself tiredly to his feet, only to find—to his surprise—that Harrier was ready with a steady hand.

“Sure there is,” Harrier said. “But you don’t have to do it all in the next chime. Rest while we get the rest of this stuff planted. Drink something. Have that lazy dragon of yours make you some shade.”

“Lazy!” Saravasse said—and how he rejoiced and mourned to hear her voice once more as she had spoken in the child-time of their love—“I like that. You wouldn’t have any of this without me.”

“And you’re going to be very well fed for you’re trouble, Gentle’dy Saravasse,” Harrier replied, “so don’t glare at me.”



IT was four handspans before their meager stores of grain and fruit were planted. Bisochim had sat beneath Saravasse’s wing the whole time, drinking the cool fresh water of Saphthiruk and regaining his strength, for what he must do next was crucial. Only a few fruits of each ripening of the trees need be returned to the earth to extend the orchards, but their stores of grain must be doubled and redoubled, the whole of the first harvests sown back into the earth, or there would not be sufficient to feed the people. It was for this reason that Harrier of the Two Swords wished it done before all the people were there to see, yet it was also a thing to be done quickly, for the people must be brought to safety before darkness fell. Even now they waited without, in the shelter of the wall, the *shotors* laden, so that they might hasten within at the first sign of threat.

When Harrier and *Ummara* Shaiara and *chaharum* Kamar and Zanattar came to escort him to the place where their hoped-for orchards and fields lay, Saphthiruk itself looked nearly as it should—a great water edged by palm trees, surrounded by hardy thick-growing clumps of desert grass.

But it was not enough. He knew that nothing would ever be enough to cleanse his spirit of the stain of blindness and pride. And as dreadful as it was to have loosed Ahairan upon the world, what was infinitely more dreadful still was that thing that he dared to contemplate but rarely: that the actions he had taken in the name of an evil day served a good end now. Had he not slain all the Blue Robes of the Madiran—Had Zanattar not learned all the arts of war—Had the String of Pearls not been utterly destroyed—

He knew that without all those things Ahairan would have triumphed already. And he did not wish to know.

All the other workers waited ready, standing at the edges of lines scratched into the desert with a sword’s blade. Bisochim came and stood among them, and he saw how even though he did not wear the Blue Robes, their eyes did not look upon him out of deference and their shadows did not fall upon him out of respect. And these marks of respect to one who had cast away all right to them was as hot coals laid upon his tongue and a thorn of fire in his heart, but Bisochim would not speak these words aloud, for this was the only penance he allowed himself. He stood among them and flung out his magic over field and orchard-to-be, and the green shoots sprang up through the broken earth, and Saravasse called out to them to bring water, and many hands poured forth water onto the thirsty earth.

And while the trees were yet young saplings, the first grain stood in the field ripe and golden, and the Isvaieni who saw it happen wept, and cheered, and hugged one

another for the joy of the sight. And many hands went forth into the tiny field to cut the stalks, to rub the grains free, to scatter handfuls of seed grain upon the next place prepared, to strew as many handfuls upon the stubble of the reaped field, to carry their buckets back to Sapthiruk to soak down the broken clay that would soon become earth.

Three times did Bisochim raise up a field of standing grain within the space of a few minutes. Three times did the Isvaieni return every grain of it back to the soil once more.

“I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m not hacking my way through any more . . . grass,” Harrier announced. “And I think the fruit in the orchard is finally ripe. So let’s get everybody in here and get camp set up. And someone else can do this farming stuff for a while.”

“Shall I tell them that, Harrier?” Saravasse asked.

“Oh, by all means, do,” Harrier answered.



UNREAL. That’s what Sapthiruk Oasis is, *Tiercel decided.* Unreal.

It was warmer inside the walls than it was outside at night because the thick sandstone walls retained the heat of the animals and the people. It was cooler inside than out during the day, because the trees gave shade. The oasis was so much larger than the nightsprings or the largest body of water that most of the Isvaieni had ever seen that even the Nalzindar were extravagant in their use of water. Eugens and Kave had both insisted on trying to shave the night they’d arrived here. It hadn’t worked out well at all, and Harrier had just laughed at them for their efforts.

Since Harrier had returned from tracking the Armethaliehans—and Ciniran had died, something Tiercel still tried not to think about—Kave, Eugens, and Magistrate Perizel had moved into the main tent. Tiercel really couldn’t get used to calling her “Helafin,” even though Harrier had told her bluntly that titles of rank were reserved here for the leaders of tribes, so she could choose whether she would prefer them to call her “Helafin” or “Perizel.” Whatever name she was known by, she was being pretty much a dead weight (though a *quiet* dead weight). Kave was cheerful, and pleasant, and did everything anyone asked him to do quickly and without complaint, but it was barely a sennight since Lord Felocan and the other four had stolen out of the camp and not come back, and Tiercel thought that their deaths, coupled with the discovery that Mistress Pallocons had been Ahairan’s creature, might have hit him even harder than moonturns of captivity among the Shamblers.

They’d been at Sapthiruk four days now, and Tiercel couldn’t really decide what was more unsettling: the way this place looked (changing almost hourly as more grass and trees and fields were planted and matured, although by now they seemed to have covered just about every square inch of ground in *something*), or the fact that it was so safe he could actually sleep through the night. (Assuming he *could* sleep through the night, which he couldn’t.)

There were only two ways in to the Oasis, and the only things (that they knew of) that could get through those entrances were Shamblers or Black Dogs. The Shamblers ought to be pretty much gone by now, and even if they weren’t, Bisochim still swept the desert around the Oasis every night at dusk with a monster Sandwind. As for the Black Dogs, Saravasse’s favorite place was up on top of the wall, and she could see for miles there. She could give them enough warning of the approach of a Dog pack that Bisochim should be able to take them out with a lightning bolt, and even if that wasn’t possible, they could bottle them up in the two tunnels and kill them there.

As for everything else . . . the first day they were here, Ahairan sent a swarm of *atish’ban-khazdara* (which were unable to fly in) followed by *atish’banjarrari* and *atish’ban-kintibaz*—neither of which were able to crawl in through the wards on the gates. When the sun had gone down, she’d sent a Goblin pack, and they hadn’t been able to get in either.

The second day had been unnerving. They’d been attacked by Balwarta three different times. But the creatures had simply . . . bounced off the wards over the top of the oasis. They’d been attacked by Sandwalkers too. Bisochim’s wards kept them from tunneling up under the walls, and they kept them from coming in through the gates, too, but apparently the things could see well enough to see that there was an opening there, so they kept trying to get in through it. And when one of the Balwarta attacked at the same time as one of the Sandwalkers, they’d end up attacking each other.

Harrier thought it was funny.

Harrier would.

On the third day, the walls and even the shield above them was swarmed by *atish’ban* insects. Saravasse had said they were coming at dawn and he’d gone to look (along with half the camp) and it had just been a glittering tide of *black*, as if somebody’d spilled ink on the sand and the ink could move. Saravasse said not to worry, because the wards would kill something that small if it stayed in contact with them for very long, and he remembered that the sentries on the gates (because of course Harrier still posted sentries) had said in the evening’s committee meeting that the *atish’ban-jarrari* and the *atish’ban-kintibaz* had backed off quickly.

This time, the *atish’ban* insects didn’t. There were too many of them to count. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Tiercel hadn’t thought there were that many insects in the entire world. They came to Sapthiruk, and they pressed themselves up against Bisochim’s wards, and they died, and the ones behind them just climbed up over their bodies and kept coming. First the bodies blocked the gateways, like horrible Demonic snow, and then, as the drifts of bodies rose higher and higher, they began to cover the wards above.

And there was nothing Bisochim could do about it. You couldn’t cast a spell through a ward without destroying the ward. Eventually the bodies blocked the light.

Zanattar was the one who led a *shotor*, blindfolded, up to the ward at one of the gates, and then lit the torch he was carrying and burned it on the haunches so it would run forward. It was dead before it reached the open sand, but its panicked exit had let it burrow through most of the mass of dead insects, and it was like starting a sandspill. The tiny black bodies—dead, dying, about to die—cascaded down the sides of the wall, and so the ones above them fell, and every one that fell knocked others loose, and in moments sunlight was streaming in again.

The ones that were still alive started climbing up the wall again, which was the most horrible part of it. But there weren’t enough of them left to be able to use their own dead as insulation this time, even though the drift of dead *atish’ban* bodies around the walls was almost six feet deep and stretched across the desert for yards.

That was yesterday. When Tiercel’d gotten up this morning, they were all gone. Harrier told him that Saravasse had watched them until about the Sixth Hour of Night—Midnight Bells—then jumped down into the middle of them and dug a clear path through them so Bisochim could walk out. Once he’d been on the other side of his own wards, he’d just called up a Sandwind to scour them all away.

“He could have been killed,” Tiercel protested. “They both could have.”

“And that was why she watched the bugs for seven hours before she decided to jump on them,” Harrier said patiently.

Tiercel still didn’t like it.

Of course, he didn’t like a lot of things at the moment. The air hummed with magic—*Wild Magic*—to the point that he was constantly suffering from nagging headaches and painful nausea, and even though his misery meant food and safety for everyone who’d managed to make it this far, he was still miserable. The fact that—according to Liapha—you could make some kind of beer from palm tree sap didn’t really comfort him, since he’d never drunk beer before in his life.

He felt like an outsider.

Everyone seemed so happy.

Even *Harrier* seemed happy.

For the first time in moonturns, the Isvaieni were able to spend their days in rest and their nights in sleep. If there still wasn't quite enough food, there was more every day. The animals were all gorging until they nearly burst, there was fresh fruit, there were sugar-sweet dates, the olive grove meant that the arrow-smiths were talking about replenishing the tribe's long-vanished store of arrows, and if there were no feathers available to fletch them, an adequate substitute could be made from scraped and shaped leather.

That would take sennights, if not moonturns, and *Harrier* had said they'd only be here a sennight at most. But they couldn't harvest and dry enough grain and fruit for the next stage of the journey in a sennight, or fatten the sheep and goats for the slaughter in that length of time either. And there wasn't a lot of point in slaughtering a skinny goat when you could slaughter a fat one. *Tiercel* knew *Harrier* was thinking of spending at least a few sennights here. It would give all of them time to rest and recover.

It would give *Harrier* time to decide who was going with them, and who was remaining behind.

Tiercel didn't have to talk to *Harrier* to know this was something he'd thought about. If *Sapthiruk Oasis* could be turned into a real fortress—even beyond what it was now—then it would be a place that the Isvaieni could wait in safety. And if that was true, then *Bisochim* and *Saravasse*—and *Harrier*, *Tiercel* suspected he was thinking—could make a run for *Pelashia's Veil* by themselves. It wouldn't matter if *Bisochim* and *Saravasse* couldn't get through the *Veil*. *Harrier* could.

Tiercel knew that it really didn't matter what *Harrier* was planning. *Ahairan* wouldn't let them get there this time any more than she had when he and *Bisochim* had tried to fly there almost three moonturns ago. And whether she did or not, the *Elves* wouldn't send the help *Harrier* was expecting. They'd still be worrying about doing the wrong thing in the wrong way, still wanting *Tiercel* to come up with some perfect solution, not willing to admit that their "Prophesied Champion of the Light" just *didn't have one*.

And so, four days after they arrived at *Sapthiruk Oasis*, *Tiercel* went to summon the only answer he had left.



It wasn't difficult to go outside the wall. Everyone in the camp knew *Tiercel*, and if *Tiercel* wanted to go outside the wall in the middle of the night, no one would see the least reason to stop him. If danger were coming from anywhere across the desert, *Saravasse* would warn the sentries and the rest of the camp.

He carried a couple of bundles of tightly-woven straw with him. Normally to make a torch, the Isvaieni would take a bundle of straw and a plug of pitch, wrap the pitch in rags, and poke it down into the looser-woven end of the straw, then dip that whole end into tar to seal it, then wrap the other end in strips of green hide and let them dry in place. But they didn't have either pitch or tar right now, so it hardly seemed worth wasting the rags or green hides on something that would burn only for a minute or two. Despite that, no one underestimated the value of having that moment of flame, and the woven straw-bundles had a number of uses, from bedding to fodder, and they were easy to make as well. *Tiercel* intended to use them for something close to their original purpose.

It was dark inside the wall. The thickness of it made the opening more of a tunnel than a gateway. *Tiercel* wondered who'd decided on the dimensions of the fortress, *Harrier* or *Bisochim* or *Saravasse*. But once he got outside, he had no trouble seeing. The moon was full again, and beneath its light, the sand looked like snow. The tracks they'd all made as they'd arrived had been swept away by the wind, just as the bodies of the *atish'ban* insects had—it didn't look now as if anybody had ever walked across this desert, and of course there weren't animal tracks.

As the thought passed through his mind, he shuddered. Would this be what the world would be like if the Demons ruled—empty, lifeless? Or would *Ahairan* and her children have some use for his kind? *Tiercel* wasn't sure. He didn't want to find out.

Getting away from *Sapthiruk* was a relief, as if a constant high-pitched whine had stopped, and he sighed in relief. If the High Magick came from the Wild Magic it made no sense for the two forms to be so at odds. And why, for that matter, had *Harrier* never gotten sick when *Tiercel* cast *his* spells, if it was simply that the two forms of magic were incompatible?

Tiercel walked as far away from the wall around *Sapthiruk* as he could bring himself to go. Even knowing that *Saravasse* was on watch, even knowing that of all the people here, he was one of the three that *Ahairan* wanted to capture alive, even the relief he felt at being away from the constant background hum of Wild Magic, wasn't enough to destroy the dread of stepping on one of *Ahairan's* Shadow-twisted *jarrari*, of finding himself suddenly face-to-face with *Shamblers*, or *Goblins*, or *Black Dogs*, or *Sandwalkers*, or—

Or just admit it. You don't really want to do this, do you?

He almost laughed out loud. He would have, if he hadn't known that laughter carried even farther across the sand—through the air—than speech. *Of course* he didn't want to do this! Summon up the monster that had haunted his nightmares—waking and sleeping—for almost as long as he'd been having them? Who would?

He'd run out of choices though. They all had.

Before he could become any more of a coward, *Tiercel* bent down and stuck the bundles of braided straw narrow-end-first into the soft sand at his feet. It wasn't nearly enough in the way of preparation—there should be either more or none—but *Tiercel* was too much of a High Mage to do this without any ritual at all. With the sideways twist inside his mind where the magick still lived, he Summoned Fire, and all five of them burst into flames at once.

"I know you're out here and I know you're following us and I want you to come out where I can see you," he whispered fiercely under his breath.

The words came out all in a rush. His hands were shaking and his stomach twisted with tension. The bundles of straw crackled and fizzled, smoking fiercely as they burned. Nothing happened, and *Tiercel's* sense of disappointment—of failure—was so acute that he wanted to scream. He blinked hard against the bright yellow glare, realizing he was staring at the flames and he shouldn't, it would destroy his night vision, and when he forced himself to look away, there was a man strolling casually toward him across the sand.

Not a man, *Tiercel* reminded himself. *Not even regular Otherfolk*.

It looked like a man—but in a strange insistent way it also looked like the Red Bear that had attacked him north of *Kellen's Bridge*, and it looked like—and unlike—the man with the hounds he'd seen on the Great Plains, and the seneschal he'd seen in *Ysterialpoerin*, and the man that both he and *Harrier* had seen in *Tarnatha'Iteru*. It wasn't a man, and it never had been. It was the creature that *Bisochim* had sent to kill him, and despite having so many opportunities, it had never taken advantage of any of them.

It walked up to the edge of the circle he'd defined with the straw bundles and stopped. "You have done well in all the tests I have set you, and passed them all," the *Firecrown* said.

For a moment *Tiercel* couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "Tests?" he demanded, his voice rising. "I—This—This was all a *test*? Which part of it was a test, exactly? The part where *Ciniran* died? The part where *Simera* died? The part where everybody in all the Border Cities died? Or all the Isvaieni? Or where *Ancaladar* vanished? *Which part?*"

"I chose no deaths," the *Firecrown* answered, unmoved. "Nor did I choose to be recalled to the world and set to walk it once more, nor did I choose to be made the measure of your worth. Yet having been recalled and sent into the living world, thereafter my choices are mine to make until the game is run."

"Game—The—You—You aren't a—A creature. A construct," *Tiercel* said. He knew he was half-babbling, shock and fury and indignation and terrified realization

all mixed up inside him so completely that he could hardly breathe. “You’re *the* Firecrown. The Firesprites’ Firecrown.”

The realization was so terrifying that Tiercel could barely breathe. This wasn’t an Elemental Creature that Bisochim had conjured up to do his bidding. This wasn’t *anybody’s* servant. This was something as much greater in power than the most powerful Dragonbond Mage who’d ever lived as . . . *As Ahairan* was greater in power than the youngest *ikulas* puppy currently chewing its way through an old pair of boots back in Saphthruk Oasis. One of the Histories Tiercel had read in Armethalieh said that the Ancient Races worshiped the Light in the form of the Great Powers, but if the Firecrown was the Eternal Light in any form at all, Tiercel would march right back to the Great Library at Armethalieh and *eat* that book right now. He didn’t think that the Firecrown had very much to do with either the Light *or* the Dark.

The Firecrown said nothing, staring at him. Tiercel realized that what he’d thought was the reflection of the flames of the torches in its eyes wasn’t: the torches had all burnt out to curling wisps of ash while he wasn’t paying attention.

“Bisochim told you to kill me, and you didn’t,” Tiercel said, taking a deep breath. “He told you to kill Ahairan, and you didn’t. Do you even *care* who wins?”

“Once my people fought for the Light,” the Firecrown answered. It wasn’t much of an answer, but Tiercel couldn’t afford to care.

“Then *help us*. You’ve been watching us. You know we’ve been losing more people each day. Ahairan is going to kill all of us. I don’t know why she’s even bothered to wait as long as she has except that she’s entertaining herself, but when she’s done, everybody else—everyone *everywhere*—will be next. Look. I know your people were the Firesprites and they’re all dead—they’ve been dead for thousands of years—and I’m sorry for everything that ever happened to them that I don’t know about, and I know, I *know*, that you aren’t *our* Great Power, but the Endarkened killed the Firesprites, and Ahairan’s a Demon too, and there isn’t anybody else left we can ask for help, so please, *please*, help us.” Tiercel stopped abruptly. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. The silence stretched. He realized he couldn’t hear anything. There wasn’t any wind, and walls of Saphthruk muffled any sounds from the camp. He wondered if he’d offended it—if he should say something else. Finally it spoke.

“I would require proof of your commitment to this cause,” the Firecrown said mildly.

Tiercel began to laugh uncontrollably, clapping both hands over his mouth to stifle his hysterical giggling when he realized that the Firecrown was still talking.

“To constrain the Elemental Spirit of Shadow will require more magic than just my own. If you can entice Ahairan back to my Place of Power—which I shall make ready to receive her—and once there, if a Dragonbond Mage gives up his life at My Shrine entirely of his own free will, then shall Ahairan be dealt with in a fashion pleasing to you,” the Firecrown said.

“But will she be destroyed?” Tiercel demanded desperately.

The Firecrown regarded him gravely. “Who may destroy a piece of the Elemental Darkness?” it asked. “But I am able to bind her for as long as Telinchechitl burns, and that should fulfill your desire.”

“Look, how—?” Tiercel began. He blinked, realizing that he was talking to empty air.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, staring out over the empty desert and trying to make what had just happened make sense inside his head. It didn’t matter how much magic he’d seen or done, and he didn’t think it would have mattered if he’d lived out the rest of his life as a Dragonbond Mage before seeing this—discovering you’d managed to summon up a Great Power, and then seeing (or *not* seeing) it vanish right before your eyes was something that Tiercel didn’t think he’d ever have been able to think about intelligently.

Finally he realized he’d better get moving. The desert might be fairly safe at the moment, but that didn’t mean it was *actually* safe. Reflex carried him back to the wall surrounding Saphthruk, but when he got there, Tiercel just sat down against it and stared off into the desert, shaking with reaction. Eventually tremors of shock were replaced with tremors of cold, but he still didn’t want to go back inside the walls. Somebody was sure to be awake, and ask him where he’d been, and what he’d been doing, and . . .

It was at that point that what the Firecrown had told him really began to sink in. To destroy Ahairan, *they had to go back to Telinchechitl*.

The thought of having to turn around and go back the way he’d come made Tiercel want to throw himself down on the sand and *cry*. They’d barely made it this far. They’d lost something like three thousand people just getting here. They’d lost most of the livestock, all of the hunting falcons, all of the flockguards, most of the *ikulas* hounds, just about everything they owned, just to fight their way to this halfway point. And now Tiercel was going to go to Harrier and say: *let’s turn around and go back the other way*.

At least they wouldn’t have to look far for a Dragonbond Mage to give up his life freely at the Firesprite Shrine.

He knew that Bisochim would be willing to do it. Wanted desperately to do it in fact—or at least wanted to die (because Bisochim didn’t know yet about Tiercel’s bargain or its terms). Better than anyone else, Tiercel knew how miserable Bisochim’s life was, watching Saravasse’s suffering day after day.

But Bisochim couldn’t be the one.

If he died, Saravasse would die too. And if it didn’t work—even if it *did* work, really—they couldn’t afford to lose Bisochim’s Dragonbond magic. But everybody had been telling Tiercel, almost from the moment Ancaladar vanished, that his Bond was still intact—even if he couldn’t Sense it—and that he was still a Dragonbond Mage—even if he couldn’t cast a single spell requiring a dragon’s power.

He was still a Dragonbond Mage. And he could seal the bargain with the Firecrown. And nobody would have to die but him. It was what he’d been meant to do all along, and he wasn’t sure whether he was remembering it or realizing all over again. Die. Exchange his life for the destruction of the Dark. Maybe that was the real reason Idalia and Jermayan hadn’t told him what he needed to do.

There was a sudden scrabble of claws on stone above his head.

“You’re sitting outside the wall, you know,” Saravasse said, craning her neck down to inspect him.

“I know. I kind of went for a walk,” Tiercel answered.

“You aren’t walking now. You’re sitting. Out there in the cold,” Saravasse explained. “Come in and have a nice mug of soup.”

“In a minute.”

“‘Now’ is a good time, too,” she said implacably.

From what she was saying, it was obvious that Saravasse hadn’t seen—or heard—anything of his conversation with the Firecrown. Tiercel would have been tempted to dismiss it as a dream or vision or hallucination or whatever he was supposed to call the experiences he had these days that weren’t quite real, except that when he got to his feet to go inside, he could plainly see his footsteps in the sand walking out, and the black smudges of ash in the distance, and his footsteps walking back.

And just a little past them—also visible on the sand in the moonlight—a short row of footsteps that walked up to the circle of ash . . . and didn’t walk away again.



TIERCEL walked through the tunnel that led through the wall—sneezing several times as he crossed the wards, and stopping to breathe hard as his stomach lurched—and went to find the Night Herd Guards. In this new world of abundance, the Night Herd Guards kept a pot of soup hot all night long. It seemed a little strange—after so much privation—to be able to eat whenever he chose, and for there to be pots of soup and gruel warming at all times, as well as flasks of fruit tea, both cold and hot, always available to drink. Tiercel wasn’t sure he’d ever take food for granted again—or *would* have, he reminded himself. His long ordeal had a fixed and definite end

now, and knowing that was strangely liberating. He'd need help to get to where he needed to go, and he knew there would be more deaths before the end—but at least it wouldn't be an end that left Ahairan triumphant and a new race of Demons ruling over everything.

If it worked. If the Firecrown could do what it had said it could. If it kept its bargain.

He was too edgy to sleep, and so he wandered around for hours, as the sun rose and the camp woke to life. The green smells of growing things were jarringly unfamiliar after so much time spent in the Isvai, but it was good to see trees and even flowers again. It was a little like getting a last chance to say "goodbye" to everything, and it didn't hurt as much as he'd once thought it would. Now it seemed like a last gift to him from the world, and Tiercel thought maybe one of the reasons Harrier fought so hard with the Wild Magic was that because for Harrier (now), the whole world was alive and always talking to him, and Harrier had always gotten into arguments with people, with the weather, with just about everything. Tiercel wasn't sure if he'd ever be comfortable with thinking of the world as a *person*, but thinking that the world might understand what he was doing for it and want to give him a farewell gift was kind of nice. In a very strange way.



"THERE you are," Harrier said with satisfaction. "I thought I was going to have to teach one of the puppies how to track."

"It's not as if I could go that far," Tiercel muttered mutinously, staring up at the sky. He was lying on his back near the wall, in the middle of the olive grove, staring up through the leaves at the sky. The grove was still in shadow—it was only a couple of hours past dawn—but the air was warm, and the morning dew had already burned away. "And anyway, you could just do another Finding Spell," he added.

"I hate paying MagePrice," Harrier complained.

"I know," Tiercel said. "But they're light for Finding Spells, aren't they?"

"Yeah." Harrier sat down beside him. "But they're weird."

"What was this one?" Tiercel asked. Harrier hadn't cast a spell to find him, but—as he'd told Tiercel a few sennights back—every time he did anything beyond Calling Fire or Coldfire, he incurred MagePrice, and he'd done a Finding Spell to track the Armethaliehans.

"You might have noticed I haven't gone to any of the evening councils lately," Harrier answered dryly.

"Well, yeah, but I just thought . . ." Tiercel stopped. *Oh come on, Tyr. You couldn't possibly have thought that Harrier was being tactful and staying out of the council meetings because he still won't let Magistrate Perizel attend?* "That was your MagePrice?"

"I told you they were weird," Harrier said in disgust. "And don't ask why me not going serves the Wild Magic, because I don't know."

The two of them sat in silence for a while. Harrier snapped stalks of ripened grain off behind their heads and winnowed them absently, rubbing the heads between his palms and catching the grain in his lap. The barley stalks here were tall and ripe, ready for harvest. It was difficult work with nothing more than *awardans* or *geschaks* to scythe the grain, but there were many hands to do the work. Anything the people didn't harvest, the animals would eat, or else it would re-seed itself as part of the next crop. In an hour or so, Tiercel knew, people would come into the olive orchard to begin harvesting the fruit. They were lucky to have any olives at all, since the Isvaieni usually ate them pitted and boiled in brine, but the Hinturi had been carrying some that were whole and fresh dried. Olives were a source of oil—if they could figure out how to press them—and they didn't need oil for light, but they needed it if they wanted to set anything on fire . . .

"If I told you there was a solution to all of this, what would you say?" Tiercel said at last.

"I'd wish it were true," Harrier said after a long moment of silence.

"What if it is?" Tiercel said. "What if there's a way to stop Ahairan—really stop her—put her somewhere that she can't do any of the things she wants to do? That would be good, right?"

He heard Harrier sigh. "Sure it would, Tyr. And if we could do it, I kind of think we might have done it a moonturn or two—or four—ago. You know: before all of our friends died?"

"I know," Tiercel said. "You know, Har, we've known each other for a really long time."

Harrier laughed quietly. "Let's see. You're seventeen now and I'm eighteen, so . . . about fifteen years, more or less. It was 17 Fruits back in 'forty-nine, Da said, when I kept you from going off the end of that pier, and it's 'sixty-four now, I guess, whatever moonturn it is. Why?"

"So fifteen years means I know you well enough to know when you aren't telling me something, and considering what I'm trying to tell you right now, I'd kind of like to know what it is." Tiercel sat up so he could look Harrier in the face.

Sun and wind and starvation and maybe even being a servant of the Wild Magic had etched marks of care into his friend's face. Harrier's skin was tanned so dark that his hazel eyes looked green even when he wasn't angry—as if the sun had bleached them—and his beard, thick and curly now, was a true red instead of auburn, with strands of pale copper threaded through it. It wasn't so much that Harrier looked old—no one would mistake him for Eugens Gillain if the two of them were placed side-by-side, though moonturns of privation and hard labor had given both of them much the same build, and Harrier and his older brother were much of a height. It was that Harrier looked *aged*. His eyes had an ancient look to them that not even Liapha's did, the look of someone who'd lived lifetimes of sorrow and unendurable choices compressed into little more than a year.

"Tell me what you . . . think," Tiercel said quietly. "I swear to you, Har. Whatever it is, no matter what it is, I won't be angry."

Harrier sighed, and looked away. He reached out and took one of Tiercel's hands in both of his. Harrier's hands were rough, heavily-calloused from day after day of holding a sword, until the calluses were almost sharp against Tiercel's skin.

"I think—I thought—I think," he said slowly, fumblingly, "that whatever you think, whatever you want to tell me . . . Whatever it is, it will be something I can't trust. Because you've never stopped dreaming of Ahairan, and now we know she can walk into people's minds and make them say whatever she wants."

Tiercel drew a quick harsh breath. Of all the responses he'd expected from Harrier, this hadn't been one of them.

"And I know Bisochim told me that I'd know when she was here. I think I would. But I wouldn't . . . What I wouldn't know—I am so *sorry*, Tyr—is if she'd come and told you something, and made you believe it was your idea, and left you alone to convince me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Harrier said, over and over.

"It's all right," Tiercel said quietly, even though Harrier's response was a devastating blow. "I guess you have to think that way. I guess we all do. It wouldn't be right if you didn't. There are—what?—six thousand people here?"

"Six thousand, eight hundred, and eighty nine," Harrier answered bleakly.

"And if you don't think of things like that, Light Above knows what could happen. But that's not how it was. Harrier, you sleep right next to me, and during the day you *ride* right next to me. Ahairan would have to be damned quick to show up and convince me that something was my idea and vanish again without you knowing she'd been there, and . . . When I dream about her, you never notice," Tiercel said.

Mentioning that fact didn't strengthen his argument, but it was something he had to say. Honesty and truth—all the truth, as much as he had—was the only thing that would help Harrier trust him. Tiercel knew Harrier wanted to trust him. That was their problem. Harrier would actually trust him less on something like this than he'd trust Zanattar—or Fannas—simply because he'd know he wanted to believe.

"You think that doesn't worry me?" Harrier said harshly. "Knowing you're thinking her thoughts, and seeing through her eyes, and that I'm supposed to *notice* when

there's a *Demon* around—and I don't?"

"Maybe it's because she isn't," Tiercel answered steadily. "Maybe I'm just listening to her, the way I did from the beginning. Maybe that's just what I'm supposed to be able to do."

Harrier growled and said nothing, still holding onto Tiercel's hand in wordless apology. Tiercel wondered how long Harrier had thought these things about him. He couldn't remember now just when he—and Harrier—had realized the visions of Ahairan had never stopped. They'd both thought they had. They should have. They'd been a warning, after all, and when it was too late for the warning to do any good, it should stop.

"But it doesn't matter," Tiercel went on quietly. "If you trust me or not, I mean. You see, it isn't even really my plan." He knew that if he couldn't manage to convince Harrier that this plan didn't come from some Overshadowing of Ahairan's, he had no hope of convincing anyone else. He didn't think Harrier had told very many people what he was worrying about. Shaiara, certainly. But probably not even Bisochim. If the Isvaieni had talked seriously about killing Eugens and Kave and Magistrate Perizel just because Mistress Pallocons had been possessed by Ahairan, they wouldn't have been any happier with the news that Tiercel had ongoing visions of Ahairan. "Last night, when all of you were asleep, I went out into the desert. And I summoned the Firecrown. The Red Man. The thing that's been chasing us ever since Sentarshadeen."

Tiercel remembered the days when Harrier would have greeted an outrageous statement like this—and it *was* outrageous, Tiercel knew that—with a yelp of displeasure followed by ranting and even open-handed hitting. But both of them had changed so much. Now Harrier just released Tiercel's hand so that he could shove his hands under his *chadar*, pushing it down to lie around his neck then scrubbing his hands through his hair.

"You didn't," Harrier said flatly.

"I did," Tiercel assured him.

"Saravasse would have seen you do it."

"Saravasse saw that I was outside the wall last night. You can ask her. As for seeing the Firecrown . . . We were wrong, or—I guess we weren't exactly, because we never did know what it was that was chasing us. We thought it was just some kind of Otherfolk, and Bisochim said it was an Elemental Creature that he conjured up at the Firesprite Shrine, and he guessed that it became an ally of Ahairan's when it wouldn't help him Bind her. But it isn't, and it didn't. Do you know what the Firecrown is?"

"No, and this isn't really the—" Harrier began.

"It's a Great Power. Do you know what *that* is?"

Harrier groaned in exasperation. "Yes. No. Kind of. They're . . . things. Somewhere between us—Mages—and the Wild Magic. They aren't *older* than the Wild Magic—exactly—but people used to worship them and now they don't."

"Used to" as in back in Great Queen Veliessar Farcarinon's time, when people actually lived in Abi'Abadshar, and when 'people' didn't include people like you and me," Tiercel said after a pause. The things Harrier knew always surprised him. "Although we had a Great Power too, I think, a long time ago, before we started worshipping the Eternal Light. The point is, the Firecrown is the Great Power of the Firesprites. The Firesprites were wiped out by the Endarkened in the Great War."

"The one Kellen fought in?" Harrier asked.

"No. The one before that."

"That's a long time ago."

"Yes," Tiercel said. More than two thousand years of "*a long time ago*," actually, and he knew just enough about Otherfolk and the Great Powers to know that twenty centuries was a stretch of time that meant about as much to the Firecrown as a sennight meant to him. "It is. And all the Firecrown's people were gone, so it just . . . went to sleep, I guess. Telinchechitl was the Firesprite Shrine. That's why Bisochim went there to conjure up Ahairan. Because the Blessed Saint Idalia—"

"Oh, *don't* call her that—you've met her!" Harrier protested involuntarily.

"Well, she *died* at one of the other Shrines when Savilla the Queen of the Endarkened killed her—*before*"—Tiercel said crossly, since he didn't want to say *before she was reborn as an Elf* any more than Harrier did—"and all of the Shrines are linked together, so that meant—because Jermayan Dragon-rider killed the Queen of the Endarkened in the same place—that Bisochim could use the Firesprite Shrine to summon up Ahairan."

"You know, telling me that Bisochim used the Firesprite Shrine to call up Ahairan isn't doing a lot to convince me that the Firesprite *god* is on our side," Harrier said waspishly.

"The Firesprites fought on the side of the Light in the Great War," Tiercel said. "And the Firecrown could have killed both of us a dozen times over—Bisochim sent it to kill *me* at least—and it didn't. When I Summoned it—that really isn't the right word, because I didn't, really, I just told it I knew it was there and it should show itself —"

"Great magical technique you have there, O' High Mage," Harrier muttered.

"Shut up. It told me it was testing me. I don't think it's . . . I think the Firecrown is even less, well, less like a *person* than Ahairan is. I think it's been trying to understand. Us. People. The world."

"*'The world is a dance of light and fire,'*" Harrier said slowly, frowning. "*'We are the heirs and the children of stars.'*" He sounded as if he were quoting something.

"Is that from the Three Books?" Tiercel asked.

"No. The Firecrown said it to me in Tamatha'Iteru. Just before it handed the two of us over to Zanattar's . . . army." The way Harrier hesitated on the last word told Tiercel he'd been about to say something else in its place. "Murderers?" Probably.

"Oh," Tiercel said.

It hurt, sometimes, to watch Harrier and Zanattar together. Not because Tiercel begrudged Harrier the chance to make friends among the Isvaieni, but because he thought Harrier and Zanattar could be good friends, close friends—and every time Harrier got near to admitting that to himself, guilt over Macenor'Telchi's death and Harrier's inability to save the people of Tamatha'Iteru drove him away from that last step. The fact that Harrier couldn't hate Zanattar—or even blame him for what he'd done any more—probably made things worse.

Overhead the leaves of the olive trees rustled. In the distance Tiercel could hear the *ikulas* puppies barking, the blating of the sheep and goats, the conversation of the Isvaieni as they went about the tasks of the camp. Here and there he could even hear a snatch of song.

"I asked it to help us," Tiercel said, when he realized the silence had stretched too far.

"And of course it agreed," Harrier answered sardonically.

"It said if we could get her back to Telinchechitl, it could bind her there for . . . for as long as Telinchechitl burns." He didn't think Harrier would ask if there would be anything more involved in the "binding." As much as he'd told was unbelievable enough. It seemed insane that the future of the world could come down to what was decided between two men, not yet twenty, talking quietly under some olive trees in a desert oasis. But it had.

"Tyr, Telinchechitl isn't burning at all," Harrier pointed out. "It's a *lake*."

“It wasn’t always a lake,” Tiercel pointed out doggedly. “It was a lake of fire before it was a lake of water. Bisochim destroyed his palace, sunk the cliff, made the lake, because Ahairan was going to make all the Isvaieni climb the cliff and throw themselves into the Firecrown’s Shrine. Don’t you think the Firecrown can put it back the way it was?”

“I don’t know,” Harrier said flatly. “I don’t know about any of this. How do we know this *Great Power* of yours isn’t just working for Ahairan the way Bisochim thinks it is?”

The thought of Harrier picking *now* to decide that Bisochim was a reliable authority on any subject at all was almost enough to madden Tiercel, except that he understood why Harrier was doing it. The stakes were just too high. Six thousand eight hundred and eighty-nine people—including Harrier’s brother, including the woman Harrier loved—were at stake. Harrier felt personally responsible for trying to keep all of them alive.

Only . . . that wasn’t really it, was it? Because Harrier had said—over and over—that they were all going to die here. Including Eugens. Including Shaiara. Harrier’s plan—his *hope*—was to keep them all alive for just long enough for the north to discover that the Dark had broken free and send someone to deal with it.

Tiercel was the one who knew that no help would ever come.

“Harrier . . .” Tiercel got to his feet and leaned against the tree. He had no intention of telling Harrier the price the Firecrown had placed on its help. Harrier wouldn’t want *him* to be the sacrifice, and Tiercel knew he had to be. “You know—if we go on the way we are—you know none of us are getting out of the Isvai alive. So what difference does it make which direction we go?”

“It makes a difference because—” Harrier said instantly, and stopped. “You could stay here. I mean—”

“That won’t work,” Tiercel said. He turned his back to Harrier and wrapped his arms around the smooth gray trunk of the tree, and threaded his arms through the branches, and leaned against it. “You have two plans. Neither one will work. The one you’re thinking of right now is leaving all of us here while you and Bisochim and Saravasse make a run for Pelashia’s Veil. Saravasse won’t be able to escape the Isvai on foot any more than she could fly out. If Bisochim is killed, his spells end, these walls and wards collapse, and we all die. If he’s Tainted, he takes them down, and we all die. And if—somehow—you make it to the Elven Lands, that doesn’t matter anyway. They won’t send help. They knew—Jermayan and Idalia and the rest of them—that Bisochim was going to call up Ahairan since before I was born—since before *he* was born—and are you going to tell me they couldn’t think of anything more useful to do about it than wait for me to show up in Karahelanderialigor so they could *not* tell me anything? They wouldn’t help me and they won’t help you.”

There was nothing but silence behind him. Tiercel drew a deep breath and went on. “Your other plan—your first plan—is to just keep going until someone in the North notices something’s wrong. There are still Wildmages there, after all, and Otherfolk, and the Nine Cities Militia could do something about most of Ahairan’s creatures. At least they’d know they had an enemy to deal with. And they could try to search out a new High Mage. But you talked to Lord Felocan. Even after watching Akazidas’ Iteru fall and being the Shamblers’ prisoner for almost three moonturns he couldn’t really comprehend what a Demon was like. What do you think people who’ve never even seen a Shambler will do? You know somebody else will come up with the same idea he did, to bargain with Ahairan. Help won’t come from the Nine Cities, Har. It can’t. Help isn’t coming.”

There was a long silence when he’d finished. Tiercel didn’t turn around to look. He didn’t want to see Harrier’s expression.

“You don’t know that’s all true,” Harrier said at last.

“I’m pretty sure,” Tiercel answered. “Anointed Champion of the Light, remember?”

He heard Harrier sigh. “Let’s go back. We need to get some baskets if we’re going to harvest . . . oats,” Harrier said.

“It’s barley. But yeah.”

They walked back toward the tents in silence. Nothing was settled.

Tiercel tried to count that as a victory.



SHE felt the Firecrown’s call across the leagues of sterile sand, and came to him of her own wish—not because he summoned her. Frustration and fury burned within Ahairan’s flesh-form like the flame of a fire, for each time her prey had attempted to seize the victory she had forestalled them—yet at every turn, the defeat she intended for them had become hers instead.

First she had swept the desert clear of life, so that the food their bodies craved would be denied to them, and when they had not despaired swiftly enough to suit her, she had cast about and found places filled with discarded flesh-forms. She had filled those bodies with her magic so that they would move at her will, and sent them against them. More than that, she had caught up every flesh-form that they discarded, turning each one into a new weapon to serve her. And as they battled against these weapons, she rejoiced in the knowledge that more such weapons journeyed southward to them, for from the place she had taken Kanash, last of the Blue Robes, she had raised up a mighty army of these useful creatures. Many were yet alive as they made the journey, and for a time Ahairan walked among them, listening to their minds. Most held nothing new within them—but some of the flesh-creatures were from that northern place that she meant to conquer and rule, and Ahairan determined she would learn all that their minds held.

A thousand southerners had ceased to live before Ahairan was certain enough of her skills to try them upon the northerners, and then ten of the northerners ceased to live also, before Ahairan discovered the way of slipping into—and out of—a mortal mind and leaving the creature alive behind her. From those minds, in the brief interludes of her occupancy, she learned that the Firecrown had spoken truth. They knew of Wildmages, but none among them knew where such creatures might be found.

And then, at last, Ahairan found a mind she could enter and leave, at will, over and over, without causing the creature to cease to live. The one that named itself in its thoughts “Vianse” knew of her presence, and knew when Ahairan took its will for her own, but fear of its fellow-creatures held it silent.

Ahairan might have done far more with the Vianse-creature, save for the fact that she became aware that many hundreds of her future slaves and worshipers had been sent into the desert as a gift to her, and so she left her great army of alive and no-longer-alive flesh-forms to continue moving southward and went to entertain herself with them. Perhaps they would tell her how to make *He-Who-Had-Summoned-Her* bow down and offer her fealty as was his duty. It was many days before the last of them ceased to live, but at the end of that time—though she was well-fed indeed on both pain and flesh, and had acquired many new weapons—Ahairan still did not understand what it was the Bound-in-Time desired most.

They said they sought freedom—yet they sought leaders to follow. They said they desired comfort and safety—yet as far as Ahairan understood either word, there was little of either to be found upon the path that they chose to follow. They said that they sought freedom from pain—yet none of those who had come into her possession would do anything to avoid pain. They said they sought power—but they lied. She had offered them power, and they had refused it—just as they had refused to become her followers, or to take solace at her hand, or to accept the comfort and safety which she offered them.

They were maddening. Their kindred were worse.

The no-longer-alive flesh-forms had become her most efficient weapon, for Ahairan had quickly learned that the alive did not like to see the flesh-forms of those they had once valued move against them when those flesh-forms were no longer alive. And at first it seemed that the no-longer-alive would gain her the victory that she

sought, for she could cloak them with magic so they could approach her prey closely, and fall upon them while they were unawares. But too soon her prey discovered a way to destroy that which it could not sense, and her losses of the no-longer-alive were great.

But Ahairan looked to claim victory from that defeat, for she sent against them openly and plainly her greatest store of no-longer-alive, for it would either be too large for them to destroy, or perhaps they would give heed to the cries for help of the yet-alive who were still in the midst of her great store of weapons, and in their attempt to aid them, destroy themselves.

All did not go as she wished, but one thing did: they took into their midst the creature whose mind was hers to claim anytime she chose. And for a short time Ahairan sowed discord, then put it into the mind of her creature to flee, believing that all the northerners would flee with them and thus she might bring all the Isvaieni to whatever place she chose.

But—bafflingly—all the northerners did not flee, nor did all her prey follow. She did what she could to cast the northern Wildmage into despair, but it was not enough. And though she might have seized him, she was still mindful of her unfulfilled bargain. Three must pledge fealty to her, or the Firecrown would not.

She knew—from the mind of the one that had named itself “Vianse”—what they meant to do next. It did not clash with her own plans, for if she had not learned as much as she wished from those whom she had hunted with her Black Salaawa and who had spent such a brief yet beautiful time in her hands, Ahairan had learned enough to set this last stratagem into motion. And so she had allowed her prey to gain the place named Sapthiruk. She allowed He-Who-Had-Summoned-Her to make it a fortress against her creatures, and then spent the lives of many against it, so they would think she raged against her own powerlessness. Ahairan knew that the day must come when he or his people must come forth from that place, whether they knew it or not. They might believe, in the strange way of the creatures of the World of Form, that they all wished to cease to be alive there, but she knew they would not do it. She knew that there were those creatures of their own kind whom she could yet reach, and take, for whom they would cast down the magics of their fortress and come out to her, and kneel in the sand at her feet—for had not *Razinda* and *Tagora* told her before they had ceased to live of the place called Abi’Abadshar and the creatures they named *children*? The Bound-in-Time were not born as Ahairan had been born. They began—and spent much time—as small soft helpless insects, and those who had caused them to be would do anything so that they did not cease to live.

Ahairan knew now what she must do to keep those small soft creatures from ceasing to live while she brought them to the place named Sapthiruk, for if they did not live, He-Who-Had-Summoned-Her and the others whom she desired would not come forth from its walls to kneel before her in fealty. It mattered not that she could not see the place named Abi’Abadshar by her magic. The road to its door was scarred upon the desert clay. She would walk that path as if she were merely a creature of flesh, and enter its gates, and call its people forth, and at last all would be as it should have been from the beginning. But there would be time enough later to set that portion of her plan into motion, so when she heard the Firecrown call to her, it pleased Ahairan to answer.

“Does your work please you?” the Firecrown asked when she arrived. “Mine pleases me.”

Ahairan knew that it spoke of the sterility of the sand that surrounded them, the lifeless aridity of the rock, the emptiness of the sky. “What work have you done?” she demanded. “I see nothing.”

“My work is not visible to the eye, for it takes place in the minds and hearts of the Children of Water. I had thought that their laggardness in accepting your rule bored you, and so I chose to act.”

“To delay grows tedious,” Ahairan admitted warily. “Yet I am confident in my victory.”

“I, too, am confident,” the Firecrown said. “In my confidence, I went to one among them who called upon me as an ally and said to him that he must find a way to bring you to Telinchechitl once more.”

“I return to the Forge of the Sun without any act of yours,” Ahairan said haughtily. “But what purpose is served—mine or theirs—in returning to Telinchechitl? Your shrine is drowned beneath the lake which He-Who-Has-Called-Me devised.”

“It need not always be so, for my power is great enough to summon forth fire again where fire once was. And to give them purpose is simple enough, for I said to the one who begged my aid that did you attend upon him there, you would be bound forever.”

Ahairan stared at the Firecrown for a moment disbelievingly, then threw back her head and laughed raucously. “It is not true! Oh, it is not true! You have lied to them, so that when they stand upon the burning shore of your shrine, believing it is the day and hour of their victory, only to find me at your side, they will be cast into such despair that they will fall down at my feet at last and give themselves to me utterly!”

“And yet,” the Firecrown reminded her, “the term of our contest is not yet run. Are you certain that I aid you in this?”

“What else?” Ahairan demanded. “Why would you go to them—and lie to them—save for love of me, and the desire to have me for your eternal mistress? I would release you from our bargain did you but ask, and take your pledge in this moment.”

“And yet I shall not ask that of you,” the Firecrown answered solemnly. “I have spoken to you no words that are not true, nor shall I. Soon the mark of my pledge shall appear in the sky, and the Children of Water will act upon that which they believe to be the truth.”

“And I shall bring them to your feet shattered in body and broken in all things which are not of the body,” Ahairan promised gleefully. “All that continue to live shall fall down and pledge fealty to me—and when our bargain is sealed, then, *then* you shall have all those whom I spurn as sacrifices to glorify your shrine!”

“Upon the day and the hour that I pledge fealty to you, surely all things will be just as you say they will be,” the Firecrown answered.



FOR the rest of that day Harrier didn’t mention their conversation in the olive grove again. Tiercel was fairly sure Harrier didn’t discuss it with anyone else either. He knew Harrier well enough to know that Harrier was thinking it over, trying to make up his mind about how much he could trust of what Tiercel had told him.

While Harrier was doing that, Tiercel was also thinking, and not liking any of the conclusions he came to.

At first he’d thought his backup plan would be leaving by himself if Harrier decided not to believe him, but even if he wanted to make the journey back to Telinchechitl alone, Tiercel realized that he couldn’t. Even at top speed, with nothing but good luck every step of the way, it was three moonturns from Sapthiruk Oasis to the Lake of Fire. Bisochim had said all along that the nightsprings he called up would probably run dry a day or so later, so Tiercel couldn’t expect to find water along the way. And even if he loaded down every *shotor* they still had with every waterskin and water cask the Isvaieni possessed (which kind of eliminated the possibility of sneaking out, and Tiercel knew that Harrier certainly wouldn’t just let him go), he couldn’t carry enough water to last him—and the *shotors*—three moonturns, much less put up a tent by himself each day to protect himself from the sun.

Which meant that to reach Telinchechitl, he’d have to have Bisochim—and Saravasse. With the two of them, his travel time would be cut from moonturns to sennights, and he wouldn’t have to carry water. Except, of course, for the fact that he’d still have to figure out some way to transport *food*—and while he could probably rig carry-baskets for Saravasse that would hold enough food for him and Bisochim, there was no way they’d hold enough food for Saravasse as well. Worse yet, to get to Telinchechitl quickly meant traveling by the most direct path, and Tiercel wasn’t certain that either Bisochim or Saravasse could find it—not from here, anyway. So that meant having Harrier along as guide, because Harrier’s Knight-Mage skills guaranteed that he could find any place he’d ever been as if he was a needle and it was compass-north.

So for Tiercel to reach Telinchechitl, Bisochim, Saravasse, and Harrier would have to come with him, and he couldn't think of any way to keep Saravasse from starving to death on the way.

But even if he could solve those problems—what about the Isvaieni?

It was true that Saphthruk was warded and that its water supply wouldn't fail. The three of them could probably even delay here long enough to help the Isvaieni—and Kave, Eugens, and Magistrate Perizel—stockpile provisions. They could even collect a few provisions of their own for the journey and take enough extra *shotors* to feed Saravasse and themselves along the way (which meant that their travel time would be moonturns instead of sennights). But once Bisochim left Saphthruk, the fruit and grain would only ripen at its usual speed. Tiercel didn't know when the next crop would be in that case, but he suspected it would be a long time away. Too long to keep the people here from starving.

As terrible as things were on the desert crossing, Tiercel knew that Bisochim's presence (and maybe his and Harrier's) was the only thing that kept the Isvaieni alive. Ahairan wanted to murder the desertfolk slowly as the three of them watched, and if she couldn't do that, she saw no reason to murder them slowly at all. Saphthruk's wards had held fast against her creatures, but Tiercel very much doubted that they'd hold against Ahairan herself.

Of course they won't, idiot. If Bisochim's magic was stronger than hers—or even as strong—he'd have destroyed her the moment he knew what she was and none of us would be here asking ourselves really stupid questions like these.

If the four of them went to Telinchechitl alone, Ahairan would enter Saphthruk and slaughter everyone who stayed behind. Tiercel couldn't see any way to prevent more deaths, no matter what decision Harrier came to.



FIRST Dawn Bells. The Tenth Hour of Night. It didn't matter that the Isvaieni weren't intending to go anywhere, the desert was the desert and its children followed its ancient rhythms. Their days still began in the hour before the dawn, when the world was steel-gray and the air was icy with chill. And of course, Harrier's always had, even back in Armethalieh.

"Let's go for a walk," he said, rousing Tiercel out of his blankets with ruthless cheer.

"Some people want to sleep," Tiercel groaned, wrapping his arms around his head. The *ikulas* puppy that had taken to sleeping with him lately decided that meant Tiercel wanted to play. It shoved its cold wet nose under his elbow and sneezed into his ear. Tiercel yelped.

"Too bad," Harrier said, though he sounded as if he was trying not to laugh. "Come on. Get up. There's hot . . . something . . . and boiled . . . something else for when we get back."

There was no point in arguing—either with Harrier, or with the puppy who was trying to lick every part of his face it could reach. Tiercel groaned, rolled over, and sat up. The puppy swarmed into his lap and he patted it absently.

"Where are you going?" Eugens asked. He looked as brightly-awake as Harrier did.

"For a walk," Harrier said, answering Eugens. "You can earn your keep until we get back by teaching this useless ball of fluff manners, Gens."

Eugens smiled faintly. The "useless ball of fluff" was already larger than many full-grown dogs Tiercel knew, even if it was still mostly legs. But he made encouraging noises, and the *ikulas* puppy bounded over to him, panting happily.



SOON enough Tiercel and Harrier were dressed and walking through the camp. Every tent was stirring to life, and Tiercel could see the blue glow of Coldfire lanterns, the warm red glow of banked coals being kindled to life. He could hear the creak of tent-ropes, smell wood-smoke and goats, hear the clink and rattle of copper water-cans as they were carried down to the oasis to be filled. These were all things that had grown familiar over sennights and moonturns. Though it was still dark, the stars overhead were growing pale with the approach of dawn.

Tiercel was surprised to find that Harrier was leading them toward the northern gateway. They passed the inner set of guards (there to turn back inquisitive livestock), walked down the long lightless tunnel, then out past the outer set of guards (there to give warning of whatever might be out there, since Saravasse couldn't watch in every direction at once). "Don't stay out too long, boys," Saravasse called down from her perch atop the wall.

"I promise we'll be back for breakfast, Auntie," Harrier called back.

Outside the walls there was more light. The smooth pale sand swept off into the distance. Harrier strode along as if he had a definite destination in mind, giving Tiercel the impression that he was intent on walking all the way to Armethalieh—or maybe Telinchechitl.

"That way's east, so this way's north," Harrier said without looking at him. "You really are hopeless outside a city, Tyr."

"I knew that. I know which is the north gate and which is the east one," Tiercel answered, trying not to be annoyed. "I'm just wondering what we do if something attacks us out here, that's all."

"Throw up our hands, scream, and run, what do you think?" Harrier answered good-naturedly. "I just wanted to be able to talk to you without too many people listening."

"And you thought that *this* was the answer?" Tiercel said in disbelief.

Harrier made a rude noise. "Yes: because they'll know we're talking, but they won't know about what, and right now I'll settle for that. You know that if—just suppose—I believed that everything you told me yesterday was Vouched-at-the-Shrine-of-the-Eternal-Light-true it couldn't be just you—or you and me—going. We'd all have to go. Every one of us."

"I know," Tiercel said. He wasn't surprised that Harrier'd come to the same conclusions he had.

"And the—" Harrier began.

Suddenly there was a rumbling sound in the distance and the ground beneath their feet shook. Before Tiercel could even begin to frame the question—*What is it what is it what*—Harrier grabbed him by the arm and took off at a dead run, dragging Tiercel behind him. The ground shook again as they were running, but by then Tiercel had gotten his feet under him and was managing to keep up with Harrier without any prompting.

They ran back through the North Gate passage without slowing down, their feet skidding on the sand that blew in over the smooth stone and collected there despite everyone's constant sweeping. Inside the walls, the *ikulas* were barking madly and racing in circles, and the goats had scattered in every direction. Harrier barely dodged one as he came through the inner archway; Tiercel wasn't so lucky, and the goat butted him so hard he sat down. Tiercel relieved his feelings by aiming an exasperated swat at the creature, but it bounded out of the way, glaring at him reproachfully and *blaating* as if this whole thing his fault.

The ground shook once more—not as violently as it had the last two times, but the shaking went on longer. Harrier was spinning out globes of Coldfire because there still wasn't much light.

"What was *that*?" Saravasse demanded, from the wall above their heads.

"The ground shook," Tiercel said unnecessarily as he got to his feet.

"It doesn't do that in the desert," Harrier said in exasperation. "Yeah, well, that's what you said the last time it did this, and it was doing it that time too," Tiercel said waspishly.

"Clear as mud," Harrier muttered. "The last time it did this, Bisochim was making a lake. Bisochim's here, and he isn't making a lake. Saravasse, can you see anything?"

"I am a creature of magic, yes, but, as you may trouble yourself to recall, Harrier, I am no Mage," Saravasse snapped. "What I *see* is a great deal of empty desert for hundreds of miles in every direction. What I can smell, on the other hand . . ." there was a long pause, while both Harrier and Tiercel waited impatiently and Harrier continued absently making balls of Coldfire ". . . I'm not sure. Odd smells such as I have only smelled before—very faintly—deep in the deep rock. They are faint here as well. Distant."

"Well, let someone know if you see—or *smell*—anything else, will you?" Harrier said.

"No, Harrier. If I notice something that represents possible danger to my Bonded and to all of you I thought I might just take a long refreshing nap," Saravasse answered tartly.

Harrier snorted. "Come on, Tyr. Let's go see what's for breakfast."

"I . . . What? I mean, we just . . ."

"Have no idea of what's going on, or what we can do about it," Harrier finished for him. "It's either going to go away, or it's going to get worse, and we might as well have something to eat before we go help put up the tents that the *shotors* knocked over. Come on."



SHAIARA didn't ask them any questions over the morning meal, and none of the three Armethaliehans—oh, Light, just when had he started thinking of people from the city he'd been born in and grown up in as "the Armethaliehans?"—knew enough about the Isvaii to know how unnatural the ground tremors were. Isvaieni manners wouldn't allow anyone to disturb them during mealtime, but afterward, Harrier had barely gotten five steps off his own carpet before Karufhad came to him to ask him why the ground had shaken and what it meant.

"I'll tell you tomorrow, *Ummara* Karufhad," Harrier said, smiling.

Karufhad made a disgusted face. "I am no *Ummara*, Harrier. I merely speak for the Adanate, until we choose our path."

"And what I say, Karufhad, is that sometimes we get to choose our path, and sometimes we just have to give up and admit that our path has chosen us. You're here and alive. That makes you both lucky and strong. You don't want to be *Ummara*. That makes you smart. Who's better to be *Ummara* of the Adanate than someone who's lucky and strong and smart?" He walked on toward the side of the encampment where the *shotors* were kept, leaving Karufhad looking thoughtful.

"Spoken like a true Apprentice Harbormaster," Eugens said. He and Tiercel had both followed Harrier.

"I've told you, Gens. Even if we were going to survive this, I wouldn't be going back to Armethalieh to apprentice to Da," Harrier said over his shoulder.

"I . . . are you sure you ought to be saying things like that out loud?" Eugens said, sounding baffled and frustrated and more than a little frightened.

Harrier laughed but there was no bitterness in the sound. "Which part? I think everyone here knows I have no intention of becoming Harbormaster of Armethalieh." He stopped and turned around to face his brother. "They all know we're going to die here, Gens. They've known for sennights. We're fighting a Demon. All we're trying to do is to keep her attention fixed on us here . . . for a while," Harrier finished, as if he'd forgotten what he'd meant to say.

"And you have to *die* to do that?" Gens asked. There wasn't any heat to the question. Tiercel thought he already knew the answer.

"Wish we didn't," Harrier answered lightly. "Come on."



KARUFHAD was the first person to ask Harrier about the ground tremors, but she wasn't the last. As the three of them crossed the camp, Tiercel lost count of the number of times the question was asked, but Harrier's answer never changed.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."



IT turned out that Harrier had been right about the tents. The entire row of them nearest to the *shotors* had been knocked down when the *shotors* reacted to the ground tremors. The *shotors* hadn't been distressed enough to bolt, but they'd been startled, and a *shotor* wasn't a small animal. There was no lack of helping hands to raise the tents again, or to tidy the wreckage, to keep opportunistic goats from browsing through the fallen tents, or to trim and splice broken tent-ropes, but Tiercel knew that it was important for Harrier to show himself this way. And if Eugens Gillain knew nothing at all about putting up an Isvaieni tent, there was nothing at all a son of the Harbormaster of Armethalieh *didn't* know about rope, no matter what form it came in. Eugens was soon seated on one of the saddles with a *geschak* and two lengths of broken rope, unweaving the ends in order to splice them together. Several of the older Isvaieni were sitting with him, discussing the differing virtues of leather ropes versus *shotor*-hair ropes versus braided wool ropes versus flax ropes versus palm-fiber ropes and more besides. Tiercel had never dreamed there were so many different kinds of rope in the world. He had a distinct suspicion that another reason for Harrier's coming over here was to show the Isvaieni how useful Eugens could be—or if not useful, at least willing to try to be.

The work of setting the eastern end of the camp to rights lasted well into the morning. When they were finished, he and Harrier took their leave of them, but Eugens was apparently now involved in talking about something complicated involving straw and palm fronds, and just waved when Harrier said they were going.



IT was the hottest part of the day. To Tiercel's relief there'd been no further ground tremors. Midday was too hot for the strenuous work of harvesting the barley and the oats, but he and Harrier each had a basket, and the two of them were back among the trees. Shaiara had quickly learned it was perilous and wasteful to ask Harrier to pick figs, as he had little idea of how to tell a ripe fig from a green one, and date harvesting was a specialized skill that both of them lacked. But it was easy enough for either of them to tell when an apple was red, a *naranje* was orange, or a *limun* was yellow, and so they were generally given the task of gathering fruit from those trees. Picking fruit was a popular job, but one that many of the Isvaieni approached so enthusiastically that in dealing with these unfamiliar trees they would strip from their branches anything even remotely fruit-like whether it was ripe or not, and due to Bisochim's magic, a tree held fruit in every stage of ripeness, from just-budding to fully mature. After a couple of days of learning experiences, there were a few hundred Isvaieni who were permitted to tend to the slowly-growing orchard—and Harrier, Tiercel, Kave, and Eugens.

Most people still preferred to rest in their tents during the hottest part of the day, and Harrier had seized the pretext of useful work to escape to this place of relative privacy. In theory they were both picking fruit. In actuality, Harrier was leaning against the wall in the cool of the shade while Tiercel leaned against the silvery bark of

the apple tree and desultorily picked apples.

“What did you mean: you’ll tell them tomorrow?” Tiercel challenged. It was a question he’d been waiting several hours to ask.

“I don’t know. Shut up,” Harrier answered tightly.

Tiercel opened his mouth to continue the argument, then took a good look at Harrier’s expression. Harrier didn’t look angry. He looked as if he were in pain—or at least in distress.

“Har, are you—?”

“I said, shut up. I’ll talk about this tomorrow,” Harrier said.

Tiercel wondered if talking about this tomorrow was Harrier’s idea. It didn’t look as if it was. He imagined what Eugens would say if he were here—that Harrier was putting everybody off until he could figure out what he was going to say—and he felt a chill of unease, because he knew that when he was hearing Harrier say “*I’ll talk about this tomorrow*” he wasn’t really hearing *Harrier* at all. He was hearing the voice of the Wild Magic speaking through Harrier, and Harrier had no more understanding of why he was saying this than Tiercel did.

“Do you like being a Wildmage?” he asked impulsively.

He wasn’t sure why he asked. He already knew the answer had to be “no.” Harrier wouldn’t be a Wildmage at all if he hadn’t followed Tiercel from Sentarshadeen to Karahelanderialigor and then accepted the Three Books after Karahelanderialigor because he’d known how dangerous the next part of the journey would be. But to Tiercel’s surprise, Harrier looked thoughtful and didn’t answer immediately, and what he said wasn’t what Tiercel expected to hear at all.

“You know how it is when there’s something you’ve got to do that you never thought of doing—and it’s something hard—but it’s good—and maybe you’re not any good at it, but you know you have to try?”

Tiercel just laughed—because that sentence summed up his whole life since Harrier’s last Naming Day in Armethalieh—and Harrier grinned at him in perfect understanding. “Yeah,” Harrier said. “It’s like that.”



BY the time the two of them settled on their sleeping-mats that night, not only Tiercel, but Eugens, Kave, and even Kamar had joined the chorus of “I’ll tell you tomorrow” whenever someone asked Harrier to explain the rumblings of the ground. There’d been a couple small ground tremors in the late afternoon, and Saravasse said that the strange smells were back stronger than before. But that didn’t mean a lot, considering how acute a dragon’s sense of smell was. She said the scent came from the south, and that it was carried on the wind, and that it was a deep-rock-place *smell*, Harrier, and perhaps if Bisochim could turn him into a dragon she could describe it better.

“If he can’t turn you into a sweet-natured little butterfly I don’t think we should hold our breaths waiting for him to turn me into anything useful,” had been Harrier’s reply. At least it had made Saravasse laugh.



IN the middle of the night Tiercel woke as abruptly as if somebody was calling his name. There was a warm weight on his chest, and another warm weight coiled up against his back: the *ikulas* that had attached itself to him a few days ago had brought a friend.

It wasn’t Isvaieni custom to name *ikulas* until they began to train them, allowing some aspect of the animal’s personality to suggest a name, and all the puppies were too young to train, even if there’d been the leisure and safety to do so. But Eugens had said that if they were underfoot he wasn’t calling them “dog” or “sweetheart” or any of the score of milk-names the Isvaieni used for puppies, and so he’d named the white one Pangan and the fawn-colored one Sormiede. (“Pangan” and “Sormiede” had both been—as Harrier reminded him—names of old girlfriends of Eugens back in Armethalieh, and well, Tiercel supposed it didn’t matter that Pangan wasn’t a girl).

Suddenly the one sleeping on Tiercel’s chest scrambled off and the one on his back jerked awake and then both of them began to howl. A second later, every *ikulas* in the camp was howling—and a second after that, Tiercel could hear the distant sound of the *shotors*.

They’re going to bolt this time, he thought in horror.

“Get up,” he said over the sound of the howling, but the others in the tent were already moving. In the distance, he could hear the night guards’ whistles blowing, a flurry of alarm.

“Boots,” Harrier said, grabbing his own. “No time for anything else.”

Someone uncovered the lantern and Tiercel could see that both the *ikulas* had retreated to the farthest corner of the tent, hackles raised, ears flat, tails tucked, still howling. As he stared at them in horror, Pangan broke off to squat and piddle on the carpet, then threw back his head to howl again.

“Bisochim—what does Saravasse see?” Harrier demanded tersely.

“There’s nothing,” Bisochim answered, confused.

“Then have her block one of the entrances. Come on.”



“SARAVASSE says the smell is worse, Harrier!” Bisochim shouted as they ran toward the open gateway. The sound of his voice was nearly lost in the alarm whistles, the nerve-racking howling, and the sound of every single animal in the camp bellowing at once.

“Well since she can’t tell us what it is or what it means, that really isn’t very—”

Tiercel didn’t know whether he finished his sentence or not.

There was a sound like the flat hard clap of thunder when it happened directly above you—only the sky was clear, and this was a thousand times louder. He didn’t even get the chance to get used to the idea that the sound had happened when the ground shook hard enough to knock him off his feet. And not just him—when he fell, Harrier fell on top of him. He clung to Harrier because the ground didn’t stop shaking. It vibrated as if it were a thin piece of wood and there were people beneath it hitting it with clubs. The thunderclap-sound had lasted only seconds, but there was still *sound*—a roaring like wind, or like rushing water, or nothing like either.

He heard Saravasse scream. It was a cry half of defiance, half of disbelief, and it only made things worse, because it caught up all the other screams—of pain, of fear—and blended them all together, and all Tiercel could think was that Ahairan was attacking them here, and he’d prepared himself to die, and he was used to being attacked, and this shouldn’t *hurt* so much. . . .

The roaring stopped first, and the shaking got less and less, until Tiercel realized that none of it was coming from outside. It was just him. The camp was dreadfully silent—not one of the animals was making a sound—and in that terrible absence of noise he could hear a sound he’d never heard in the encampment before, no matter how many times Ahairan had attacked them.

He could hear the Isvaieni sobbing with fear.

"Hey," Harrier said quietly, sitting up. He heard Harrier's voice shake; it was funny how knowing that Harrier was just as scared as he was actually made him less scared. "We need as much light as we can get. Can you make some?"

"Yeah. I'll see." Tiercel closed his eyes and took a deep breath, shifting around so he was sitting on the ground. He rested his hands in his lap. His head hurt and he was dizzy, and he knew that trying to conjure MageLight in the middle of all this Wild Magic was going to give him a brutal headache. But he breathed out—hard—and sucked in a deep breath and held it, and concentrated, and the familiar blue fog began to form against his palms. The anticipated spike of pain between his eyes was almost a relief.

"Good," Harrier said, sounding relieved. "As much as you can."

All around them the noise of the camp was growing louder by degrees. The shocked near-silence of the first moments after . . . whatever-it-had-been . . . was replaced by cries for help, and shouts of assistance, the babble of a thousand (more) conversations, the squalling of livestock. The sounds grew louder with every passing moment, but by now Tiercel had survived too many battles to find them anything but reassuring.

"Bonded! You must see this!" Saravasse said urgently from above their heads.

"See *what*?" Tiercel heard Harrier say in exasperation. He kept his eyes closed. He didn't need to see to conjure MageLight, and he'd rather not look at a ball of light right now.

"South! In the south! Oh, come—please come!" Saravasse said, sounding almost panic-stricken.

Tiercel heard footsteps hurry away. Then he heard Harrier swear quietly but sincerely. "Is Shaiara—?" Tiercel asked.

"Gone with Kamar, Natha, Raffa, and Narkil to help Karufhad. Some of the Adanate were caught inside their tent. Light, we're going to spend all day putting every single one up again," Harrier answered.

Tiercel sighed and opened his eyes, making sure to send the latest ball of MageLight skyward first. Harrier was standing beside him, making Coldfire. There were only about a dozen globes aloft right now, but that was enough to show him that every single tent in the entire oasis had gone flat.

"What happened?" Tiercel demanded in shock.

"The ground tremors must have jarred all the tent-pegs loose," Harrier said, thinking about it. He sighed. "What I wouldn't give right now for a telescope. And a ladder."

"We could build a ladder," Tiercel suggested.

"Not in the next half-chime," Harrier said disgruntledly.

"Pangan! Sorniede!" Tiercel said suddenly. "They were still in the tent when we left! If it came down on them—"



THE two *ikulas* had been huddled near the back of the tent when it collapsed, but that meant they were easily rescued, since they'd only been pinned by the fabric at the edge—still a considerable-enough weight that they hadn't been able to squirm free. By the time Harrier and Tiercel had freed them, Shaiara and Kave joined them.

"The Nazindar are safe," she said. "Eugens is also safe, and has gone with Kamar and Thadnat to help those who are pinned within their tents. Helafin and Raffa have gone to gather people to make certain no beasts drown themselves in the oasis."

"Have a dog," Harrier said, offering her Sorniede. Shaiara's mouth quirked. Harrier set Sorniede down on the ground.

"It is tomorrow, Harrier," she said meaningfully.

"Dawn," Harrier said firmly.

"Harrier, you really need to see this," Saravasse said from the wall behind them. Bisochim stood on the wall beside her.

"Yes, and that will be so easy," Harrier said, "because if you ask half the people here, I can fly. However, I can't."

"I will pick you up and set you on top of the wall. All of you. Step back," Saravasse said.

They got out of her way quickly—especially Kave, who was far less used to dragons than the others were. Tiercel wasn't sure what he'd expected Saravasse to do, but in fact all she did was gather herself at the edge of the wall several yards from where they stood, both wings tucked tightly against her body, and spring down. Tiercel winced as the ground shook with the impact of her landing, but at least the shaking was over in seconds.

"It is very wide. Do not worry. You will not fall off," Saravasse said reassuringly.

"I, ah, I think I'll stay here, if that's all right," Kave said.

"I'll go first," Tiercel said, stepping forward.

No part of a dragon was small, though their forelimbs seemed like something of an afterthought in contrast with their enormous wings and huge haunches. Despite this, Saravasse's front claw was large enough to wrap easily around Tiercel's torso, and in fact, she could easily have held Tiercel and Harrier both in one claw without fear of dropping them. It was true that she had to grip the top of the wall with her other foreclaw for support, since to reach the top of the wall with him she had to stand on the draconic equivalent of tiptoe, but she gripped him carefully, rose up on her hind legs, stretched to her full height, and placed him delicately on the top of the wall without jarring him at all.

Harrier was next, then Shaiara, then Saravasse moved a little farther down the wall and simply . . . jumped . . . landing on its top like a very large and improbably scaled cat.

"Now what?" Harrier asked. "It's dark. I don't see anything."

"Look south," Saravasse said, sounding troubled. "Even you should be able to see it."

"Yeah," Harrier said after a moment. "Tyr, move your MageLights down below the edge of the wall."

Glancing back down inside the wall, Tiercel noticed that the globes of Coldfire were hovering barely a dozen feet above the ground. He quickly lowered his spheres of MageLight to match. Without the lights here at their level, it was darker. The flat top of the wall shone brighter than the sand had the last time Tiercel had walked out beneath the stars. On the desert side there was nothing but utter blackness. On the oasis side, a dim blue radiance.

Harrier walked down the center of the wall as if he were just walking across the desert, striding along until he was about thirty feet ahead of the rest of them. "It's burning," Harrier said in a flat strange voice. "The south is burning."

Tiercel raised his gaze from the top of the wall and looked.

In the distance there was the brightness of fire. He could see a tall ragged V-shape hanging in space. It glowed a dull yellow orange against the night, and at its base he could see the brighter yellow of honest fire. For a moment he couldn't make out what it was he was seeing, then he understood.

Of course. The trees and orchards and fields at Telinchechil. Harrier said the Isvaieni took everything they could possibly use when they left, but there still must have been something left behind that could burn. And it is.

"It's the Firesprite Shrine," he said aloud. "The Firecrown's put it back."

“I guess it has. All right. It must be time to pay the price,” Harrier said.

Eighteen



A Stone of Flame

GETTING OFF THE wall was the same as getting onto it, just in reverse. Somehow, it seemed more awkward, though, and Harrier snarled under his breath the entire time about ladders. What Tiercel wasn't expecting was for Harrier to grab him the moment they got down—he'd insisted that Tiercel go first, and he'd come down second—and drag him off into the dark.

"Hey—look—what are you—?"

"Shut up," Harrier hissed in his ear. "And keep your MageLights low."

With the MageLights hovering near the ground, most of the walled oasis was dark. It didn't seem to matter to Harrier, who could apparently see exactly where he was going. Tiercel tripped and staggered—first over the uneven sand that was the pathway between tents, then through waist-high grain. He just hoped Harrier didn't drag him into a tree.

Eventually—when the globes of azure fire were only a distant radiance—Harrier stopped.

"What exactly did it say?" he said.

"Who? The Firecrown? It said if we got Ahairan back to Telinchechitl, it would bind her," Tiercel answered.

He could almost hear Harrier roll his eyes. "*Exactly*, Tyr. What did it say *exactly*?"

Tiercel thought hard. "Entice Ahairan back to its Place of Power—it would make it ready to receive her—Ahairan would be dealt with in a fashion pleasing to us—well, it said 'me,' but—and it said it could bind her for as long as Telinchechitl burns." His recitation was necessarily choppy since he was editing what he remembered as he spoke to leave out all the parts about "Dragonbond Mage gives up his life."

"Nothing about who has to be there?" Harrier demanded.

"Well, I'm guessing me, since I made the bargain. And you and Bisochim, since she wants you too, and the whole point is to, you know, *lure* her. But, no. The Firecrown wasn't really specific. It doesn't matter. Harrier, you know what will happen if—"

"No it won't. I won't let it. Come on. We'll go tell Shaiara. When we do, you have a very important task to perform, Anointed Champion of the Light."

"Me? What?" Tiercel asked suspiciously.

"Keep her from killing me," Harrier answered.



"AND you believe this will work?" Shaiara demanded in disbelief less than an hour later.

"I believe that Tyr says the Firecrown said it would do it," Harrier answered. "Surprise," he added in Bisochim's direction. "You woke up a god."

"Great Power," Tiercel amended.

"Which explains why it never did anything you wanted it to, because Great Powers are like goats. And the Wild Magic," Harrier added in an undertone.

Harrier had asked that Shaiara's tent be put back up immediately so they could have a private discussion. They'd done it, although across Saphthruk, the rest of the Isvaieni were waiting for dawn to set their tents again. Tiercel was only grateful that everyone was still using Coldfire to light their tents, rather than actual fire, or the ground tremors would have been a disaster rather than just a huge inconvenience. But it was almost an hour since what he was pretty sure (now) had been an explosion, and there hadn't been any injuries reported.

It was true that only Shaiara, Harrier, Tiercel, Bisochim, and Kamar were supposedly present at this discussion. It was also true that privacy was only a polite fiction among the Isvaieni at the best of times. Raffa and Thadnat and the three Armethaliehans were sitting on the carpet at the front of the tent, less than twenty feet away, and the Nalzindar at least could probably hear every word.

"I can't believe you just compared the Wild Magic to a *goat*!" Tiercel whispered to Harrier in exasperation.

"Try living with it. Any time you want your own set of Three Books, I'll see what I can do," Harrier muttered back.

"But Abi'Abadshar is not Telinchechitl," Shaiara pointed out, ignoring the byplay.

"No," Harrier said. "But it will hold all the people here, and it's warded against all magic. Tyr and I could both cast spells when we were inside it, but it was built by this old Elf Queen who was fighting the Endarkened, so I bet Ahairan can't, even if she finds it. And if she *does* find it and *can* cast spells, nobody's much worse off than they'd be in a camp, because I'll still bet she can't get any of her creatures inside."

"A number of guesses and a number of risks, Harrier," Shaiara said gently.

"I know," he answered. "But when you come down to it, we have three choices. One: we ignore the Firecrown's offer and stay here, all of us. If we do that, sooner or later Ahairan gets bored, and I don't think we'll like that. Two: we ignore the Firecrown's offer, some of us stay here, some of us try to carry a warning to the Elven Lands. I know I said we were going to Armethalieh, but that was before I talked to Helafin and Felocan and the others. I don't think that will work either. Ahairan will kill anybody left behind."

"That is acceptable, Harrier, if the warning reaches the High *Ummara* of the Elves," Shaiara answered softly.

"I know, Shaiara. But it probably wouldn't. And even if a warning got through, I'm not sure enough that Vairindiel Elvenqueen would send help to take that chance. So that leaves our third choice. Believe what the Firecrown told Tyr, which means we go back to Telinchechitl. But we don't *all* go back to Telinchechitl. If everybody's at Abi'Abadshar, they aren't standing on the edge of the Lake of Fire waiting for Ahairan to push them in—assuming the Firecrown's either lying or a little slow with this 'binding' thing. And it's going to be hard enough just to get that far. The fewer people we travel with after that, the faster we'll go."

"I suppose it must now be 'tomorrow' for you have told me all that I wished to know," Shaiara said with a small sigh. "I thank you for giving this word to me as soon as you were able. When must we leave?"

Harrier glanced at Tiercel. Tiercel shrugged. Harrier pulled off his *chadar*, looped it around his neck, and ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know. I think we have time to make all the preparations we can. You're going to be better at knowing what needs to be done than I am. I'll tell you one thing, though, I am *not* traveling with any more sheep and goats. We eat them here."

The ground shook again, and the lantern attached to the tent-pole rocked wildly. Kamar sighed. "Perhaps this part will end soon."

"Perhaps Harrier will go and explain to the people that it is the Firecrown preparing Ahairan's cage," Shaiara said resolutely.

"Yeah," Harrier said, getting to his feet. He glanced at Tiercel, and he didn't need to speak aloud for Tiercel to know what he was thinking. *We hope.*



MAGISTRATE Perizel pounced on Harrier the moment he walked out of the tent, saying that she couldn't help but overhear his conversation and asking if what he'd said to Shaiara was true. Harrier just said that she should come along with him, and called down a globe of Coldfire to light their way, and went off to make the rounds of the encampment.

So Tiercel suggested that Kave come with him, and Eugens came along with the two of them, and they went off in the opposite direction from Harrier and Magistrate Perizel. Tiercel told everyone who asked pretty much the same thing that Harrier was probably saying: "The ground tremors were made by an ancient Great Power that's always lived in the Barahileth. It's said it will bind Ahairan at Telinchechitl. It's making a cage for her."

"That's true, isn't it?" Kave asked. "What you're saying?"

Tiercel felt a flash of irritation—not from being disbelieved, it wasn't that—but from the fact that Kave was asking that question here, where anyone might hear, and because keeping people from doubting, from panicking, was important.

"Yes," he said briefly. "It's all true. It's strange, but you get used to it."

"I won't," Kave said fervently. "I can't imagine ever . . . I mean . . . how can you?"

Tiercel shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

A little while after that, some of Eugens's new friends from the day before offered Eugens the hospitality of their carpet, and Tiercel shooed him off to join them. None of the plants were available that the Isvaieni normally brewed as tea, and there wasn't enough of the *kaffeyah* left to share out, but the desertfolk were brewing up something out of *naranjes* and dates that was actually pretty good. And it was nice and hot when the temperature dropped at night. He and Kave stopped for a token cup before moving on.

"Let me guess: you don't have any choice in this, either?" Kave said once they were walking again. This time it was a joke.

"I've lived with the Isvaieni—among the tribes—for almost five moonturns now. In one of the *Iteru*-cities for two moonturns before that. The customs there are . . . were . . . different, but more like here than like Armethalieh. It's just good manners to try to fit in."

"It's hard to believe all of them are gone," Kave said quietly.

"Yeah. Just . . . don't say that around Harrier, okay? He lost a really good friend in Tarnatha'Iteru. It's been hard for him to accept that no matter what anyone saw, Ahairan was the one who did the killing."

"But . . . isn't he a Wildmage?" Kave asked, and now he sounded so confused that in spite of everything, Tiercel nearly laughed out loud.

"Kave, Harrier says the Wild Magic is as annoying as a *goat*. And the only other Wildmage either of us has ever met kept hitting him with a wooden spoon. Wildmages aren't like, oh—like Kellen and Idalia and Vestakia the Redeemed in *The Book of the Light*. They're people."



BY the time Tiercel thought it ought to be dawn, he and Kave had worked their way most of the way around to the eastern side of the camp. Harrier had said that the Firecrown had done whatever it had done around Watch Bells—the Eighth Hour of Night. Dawn had been coming later and later as the year progressed, and now (according to Harrier, who was as reliable an authority as any of the tower-clocks back in Armethalieh) dawn began just before the Eleventh Hour of Night and was fully established by the Twelfth.

Tiercel wasn't good at telling time by the position of the stars—or at guessing the passage of time—but he was sure it had been at least three hours since he'd been jarred out of his sound sleep by Pangan and Sormiede howling. He frowned. No. He'd woken up just before they'd started. He shook his head. No way to solve all these mysteries; he'd try to remember to mention it to Harrier later. But regardless of how weird his life had gotten, eight and three was eleven, and he knew that when the stars dimmed and vanished overhead, the sun was about to appear. So when he glanced up and could only see the brightest stars, he assumed the sun would appear in a few minutes.

But it didn't. They got all the way to the edge of the tents, and nothing had changed, and Tiercel was starting to quietly panic, wondering if Ahairan suspected the Firecrown's plans and had managed to cast some kind of spell over Saphthruk that would—he didn't know—*stop time* or something. About the time he was about to tell Kave they needed to drop everything and go find Harrier, Kave turned to him with an odd look on his face.

"The air smells funny," Kave said.

Tiercel sniffed, trying to decide what Kave might be smelling. There was a faint harsh tang to the air—unlike the rank-but-familiar scent of *shotor*-dung cookfires. He walked toward the wall.

"Saravasse?" he said.

He didn't bother to raise his voice. Draconic hearing was extremely sharp. A few moments later Saravasse came trotting along the wall toward him. Tiercel suspected that she liked having her own private high road where she could look down on all the people and sleep undisturbed on smooth warm stone. She never came down inside the wall: tonight had been an exception. Even when she fed (which had been frequently, since they'd arrived), Bisochim led the *shotors* out into the desert for her. Tiercel knew that normally dragons didn't need to eat every day. He also knew that Saravasse's still-unhealed injury not only made her hungry and irritable, but that she'd been eating far less than she'd wanted to on their journey here. Nobody begrudged her the chance to make up for lost time.

"Yes?" she answered. As she swung her head around and down to look at him, Kave made a strangled noise and stepped back. While he was a lot better around Saravasse than either Eugens or Magistrate Perizel was—Eugens tended to behave as if she was an inanimate object, ignoring her even when she moved and talked; and Magistrate Perizel was frankly terrified of her—he still tended to cringe every time she moved, and so of course Saravasse took advantage of that unmercifully.

"What's that smell?" Tiercel asked.

"If you mean the new smell that wasn't in the air two days ago and is strong enough even for something with a nose as small and weak as yours to smell now, it's smoke from Telinchechitl. It's going to get worse, I'm afraid. Years ago—long before I Bonded—I saw something like it. Among the Elves, it is called *tehukohiakhazarishtial*. A hollow mountain where the blood of the Deep Earth—from deeper in the stone than any dragon has ever laired—spurts into the sky like water from a fountain. The rock is so hot it runs like water. It can take days, even sennights, to cool to hardness. There is smoke also—there is smoke *now*, a great

pillar of it. Soon you will see.”

“Terrific,” Tiercel muttered. “How long is this—this—*tehuko* going to keep spraying liquid rock into the sky?”

Saravasse snorted. “How should I know? I’m no Wildmage to see the future. But it does have some pretty side effects. Come and see. The sun is rising.”

Tiercel shrugged and walked toward the eastern gate. There weren’t any tents pitched near the gateway itself—there was barley planted near it, but the path leading to it was clear. When he and Kave had walked through the tunnel to the outside, Tiercel saw that despite the darkness in the sky above, the sun was indeed rising.

There weren’t clouds, of course (there were never any clouds in the Isvai unless there was a Sandwind or somebody was casting a spell), and so Tiercel had gotten used to sunrises here being pretty, but pretty interchangeable: the horizon turned pale, the sky turned white, and the sun came up.

Not today. There still wasn’t much in the way of clouds, but today the sun was a misshapen deep-orange oval in a brilliant red sky. The Isvaieni who were guarding the gate at the outside of the tunnel were looking at it nervously.

“It’s not an omen or anything,” Tiercel said, feeling helpless. “There’s just a lot of smoke in the air.”

“It comes from the south,” Kave said, pointing. “That place you came here from. The Firecrown is getting ready to cage Ahairan, and it’s making a burning mountain there. When the sun is a little higher, you’ll be able to look south and see the smoke. And it’s filling the air, too. That’s why the dawn looks red. I’ve seen your lanterns. They smoke sometimes, don’t they?”

The nearer of the two sentries made a face. “When we had oil for them.”

“And the smoke coated the glass on the inside, and when it did, the flame looked yellower than it was, right?” Kave continued.

“True enough, Ribuk,” the farther sentry said peaceably.

“But the sky isn’t yellow, northerner. It’s red,” Ribuk said.

“Yes,” Kave answered, sounding pleased, as if he’d gotten the answer he wanted. “But this isn’t just a lantern-flame that you’re looking at through a pane of smoky glass. This is the sun. And the air is filled with smoke. When the sun is low on the horizon and it shines through things in the air—smoke or fine dust or even clouds such as we have in the north—its light changes color this way. When it’s higher, you’ll see that it looks much as it always does. And when the sun sets, it’s going to look about like it does now again.”

“Next you will tell us that you know how long this will go on,” Ribuk growled.

“He does not, I do not, Tiercel does not,” Saravasse said from the wall above their heads. “But if that sunrise were as red as Ahairan’s robes—which it is not—I tell you, silly man, that it would still be neither a danger nor a threat. It’s just pretty.”



“HOW did you know all that stuff—about light changing color and all that?” Tiercel asked, when they were back inside. If the sun was rising, it was the Twelfth Hour of Night, which meant full light in an hour, which meant the start of a long day of work.

“Oh,” Kave said, sounding embarrassed. “I wanted to be a natural philosopher when I was a boy—I even studied it for a while when I was at University. But my family wanted me to go into Law, because House Breulin has always had someone in the Magisterium and my older brother had the title.” He shrugged.

“I’d been going to study Pre-Flowering History,” Tiercel offered.

“Now you’re living it,” Kave said.

It was meant for a joke, but when they looked at each other both of them realized it was too true to be funny.



BY the time he and Kave got back to Shaiara’s tent, Tiercel realized that “smoke in the air” was an understatement. It ought to have been full light, but the day was as dim as if the sky was overcast, and the globes of Coldfire and Magelight still shone brightly. “If there’s enough smoke to make it this dark, why don’t we smell more of it?” he asked Kave.

“Probably because it’s high in the sky,” Kave said. “Like clouds. I’ve never heard of a *tehuko*-mountain before. I’m not sure what they do.”

“Let’s hope they *don’t* do all the things Saravasse was talking about,” Tiercel said.

Harrier and Magistrate Perizel were already there when they arrived. Magistrate Perizel looked thoughtful. Harrier looked as if he’d spoken to all six thousand, eight hundred, eighty-nine people at Saphthruk *personally*. Pangan and Sormiede were lolling at his feet looking wistfully at the pot of dates and boiled grain. Over breakfast, Tiercel and Kave explained what they’d learned from Saravasse, and what they’d seen. Harrier glowered up at the sky as if the gloom were a personal enemy.

“So in addition to anything Ahairan might want to do to us on the way, we need to march south through as much smoke as a grass fire and cross a few rivers of molten rock on the way?” Harrier asked.

Tiercel shrugged. “Probably not the rock. It was a Lake of Fire last time. It should be a Lake of Fire this time.”

“Why does that not reassure me?” Harrier asked.

Tiercel just shrugged.



ALL through the first uncertain day, the Isvaieni wandered out through the gates of Saphthruk Oasis to gaze southward with a mixture of curiosity and dread. Some of them went to look several times, and Tiercel thought they might be hoping to see something different, but the sight was always the same: an enormous black cloud of smoke stretching skyward. That night—and all the nights thereafter—the smoke-column was lit with a dull red glow from the fires that burned at its base.

Once the *tehuko* began to burn—no one could manage the jaw-breaking mouthful of “*tehukohiakhazarishtial*,” so everyone used the abbreviated form that Tiercel had coined—the light had a brassy yellow look to it, as if the desert was always on the verge of a Sandwind. At night the moon, yellow as a gold coin, was alone in the sky, and the smell of smoke was ever-present.

On the third day after the appearance of the *tehuko*, flecks of ash began to rain down over Saphthruk and the surrounding desert like warm gray snow. On every day that followed, everyone spent as much time sweeping ash off of every possible surface with hastily-fashioned straw brooms as they did preparing to leave. Bisochim’s wards would not keep it out, and the ash was fine and soft and swirled in choking eddies like *ishmain*-dust. It only added more work to days already overfull, for there were a thousand things that had to be done before they could head southward.

Harrier made no secret of his worries when he spoke to the *Ummarai* and their *chaharums* about what they could be facing on the journey back into the Barahileth. It wasn’t the Firecrown that concerned him now, but what Ahairan might do to keep them from making their rendezvous with it. Tiercel found it hard to imagine that Ahairan could do worse to them than Telinchechitl itself was. But grim as that was, it hardly mattered. Everyone knew that anyone who stayed behind at Saphthruk would die.

Tiercel hadn't been there when the Isvaieni had left Telinchechitl, but from the way everyone was talking, this departure was much the same. Only this time they had a better idea of what they were facing, so Harrier had Bisochim spell-ward the food supplies while the Isvaieni stripped Sapthiruk of everything remotely edible. Every goat and sheep was slaughtered and eaten. All the surplus *shotors* were butchered and their meat dried. Surplus tents were turned into carrying bags, clothing, weapons. Basket upon basket was filled with rootstocks and wet earth so that the Isvaieni could plant food for the *shotors* to browse upon at need—but since the animals had gorged themselves nonstop since their arrival it would be at least a fortnight before they'd need to be fed. As they neared the day marked for their departure, they chopped down the trees they'd planted barely a fortnight ago. They turned some of the wood into clubs, some into arrow-shafts, and the rest into charcoal that would fuel fires upon the journey.

And at last—ten days after Telinchechitl had begun to burn in the south once more—they were ready to leave Sapthiruk Oasis.



IT should have been like any other morning (any other morning that was too dark and raining a *tehuko's* ash), or . . . almost like any other morning, Tiercel thought. It was true they were leaving Sapthiruk Oasis and heading back into the Barahileth, but it would be two moonturns and probably a fortnight more to Kannatha Well, then at least another fortnight from there to Abi'Abadshar. Abi'Abadshar was six days away from the Dove Road, but once they'd gotten to the Dove Road from Abi'Abadshar, it had only taken the four of them (Ciniran had been alive then) about ten days to get within sight of Telinchechitl. So it would be another three and a half moonturns, more or less, before Tiercel got the chance to fulfill the promise he'd made to the Firecrown and sacrifice his life as either proof of his dedication or to add the magic of his death to the Firecrown's trap, depending on which version of its story was closer to being the real truth. He was as jumpy and on-edge as if it was going to happen in three and a half hours.

The last thing the Isvaieni did before they left Sapthiruk was catch the *ikulas* puppies—who only wanted to romp through the pre-dawn twilight—and load them into their travel baskets. The oldest of the *ikulas* would be a year old when they arrived at Abi'Abadshar, if they all got there alive. It was hard to believe.

Then they began.



THESE days they held what had used to be their evening council meetings at midday. It was safer. It was too dangerous to spend a moment of darkness in inattention—a terrible paradox, since they had to sleep at night. To travel at night would leave the caravan far too vulnerable to attack, and they needed every possible hour of light for travel. When they stopped at midday now, it was as briefly as possible, and they only stopped at all because it was stupid to push the *shotors* to the point of collapse this early in the journey.

"This isn't working," Harrier said wearily, leaning over to rest his forehead on his knees.

His robes—bright blue even when they'd left Sapthiruk—were gray now with rubbed-in ash. Everyone's were. Everything was covered in ash—the air was filled with it any time the wind blew—and the wind blew constantly now. It was almost impossible not to breathe it. They were using up insane amounts of water because everyone kept the fronts of their *chadars* damp in a hopeless effort to keep the ash out of their noses and mouths, and they used up even more water washing the nostrils of the *shotors* and the *ikulas* two or three times a day.

And I thought I could go south by myself, Tiercel thought. I must have been crazy. Of course, he hadn't known what the *tehuko* would be like. No one could have predicted that. He wasn't sure that even if Saravasse had been able to fly she would have been able to fly south into the smoke and ash and wind.

They'd been heading south for a moonturn. In that time, they'd lost over a thousand people. A few to lung-sickness from breathing the fine ash, whether because they did not realize the seriousness of their affliction before it was too late for Bisochim to Heal them, or from the traditional belief among the tribes—widespread even now—that grave illness was a sign that it was time to lay one's bones upon the sand in order to make way for the young and the strong. But most of those lost had been lost to Darkspawn attacks—to Goblins, primarily, though there'd been a few attacks by Balwarta. The Goblins wouldn't come up out of the ground except when it was dark, but each defense they used against them only worked once, if that. When the ground was warded—and the camp was walled off by a warded ice-wall—the Goblins had climbed the ice wall. Bisochim hadn't warded the space above the wall—he was just as exhausted as everyone else, and had counted on Saravasse's ability to spot Balwarta before they were close enough to pose a danger. No one had thought any Darkspawn creature would be willing to endure the pain of climbing not just wards, but wards cast on walls of melting ice, so that they constantly slipped and fell back.

They should have remembered the lesson of the *atish'ban* insects at Sapthiruk Oasis. They didn't, and it had led to the night of the Isvaieni's worst losses. If the Goblins hadn't stopped to feed—if hundreds of Isvaieni, knowing their foe's weakness, hadn't thrown themselves into the Goblin horde's jaws to save the rest—and the precious *shotors* . . .

Since then, Bisochim cast his spell-wards wide and high each night, turning them into lethal traps, but it was only a matter of time until the Goblins found a way around those as well. And meanwhile, the exhaustion of constant spellwork was taking its toll on him.

"What do you suggest?" Tiercel asked Harrier. "We can't turn back."

"I know," Harrier muttered. "The trouble is—"

He glanced around the tent. These days all the *Ummarai* came to the council meetings, though less to make their voices heard than simply, Tiercel thought, to see that the others were still alive. Shaiara was there with Kamar. Bisochim. Zanattar and Kataduk. Kinaraf of the Laghamba and Bakhudun of the Hinturi. Liapha, Ogmazad, Omuta, Karufhad, Fannas—many of whose Kareggi had perished in the worst of the Goblin attacks. There were even places made on the carpet for Magistrate Perizel, Kave, and Eugens. Tiercel thought that had less to do with the possibility that Harrier had finally developed any sense of tact than that he intended to leave all three of them at Abi'Abadshar and he needed to figure out some way to teach them Isvaieni customs in a hurry.

Fannas waved a languid hand. "Oh, Harrier, I beg you—tell us that matters will get worse."

"A lot worse," Harrier answered with a tight smile. "And no matter how much of an idiot Ahairan is—assuming a Demon can be an idiot—even *she* has to know there's only one road across the Barahileth. All she has to do is wait there for us. Whatever we're facing here, we aren't facing a tenth of what she'll have waiting for us when we reach the Dove Road."

"We're going to die before we get anywhere near that *tehuko*," Eugens said in a flat stunned voice.

He wasn't saying anything everyone hadn't been thinking since the second or third attack. Tiercel was sure that Harrier could tell him the exact number of the dead, but he didn't want to know. Every time in the last two sennights that he'd closed his eyes he'd seen Pangan screaming in agony as he died of Goblin poison. It was Simera's death all over again, and it gave Tiercel nightmares that had nothing to do with visions sent by Ahairan. He pushed the thought away as the others in the tent stirred unhappily. It couldn't be allowed to matter now. And there *had* to be a way . . .

"No!" he said suddenly. "No. We won't. Why—Har, why do we have to take the Dove Road at all?"

"Water?" Harrier suggested with acid sweetness.

Tiercel knew there were still nearly six thousand people in the caravan. They'd talked about what lay ahead, especially once they'd seen what they faced here. In the

Isvai, Bisochim could still Call a nightspring into the surface of the desert itself and have the water be drinkable once they'd strained the ash out of it. In the Barahileth, with its salt-flats, *ishmain*-wastes—and what Kave said would be a much thicker layer of *tehuko*-ash—any water he might Call would be foul beyond use immediately. They'd need to rely on the stone-lined deep wells along the Dove Road.

"No, but we—So what if it rains? For the whole time we're going to Telinchechit! We wouldn't need to take the Dove Road, then—we could catch rainwater for drinking. And we wouldn't have to worry about the heat in the Barahileth—because it would be raining."

"That's really stupid," Harrier said slowly. "Can you do it?" he asked Bisochim. "Make it rain—here, now—and keep it raining for the next three moonturns, until we reach Telinchechit!"

Everyone in the tent looked at each other. Nobody said a word. The only experience the Isvaieni had ever had with rain was the hurricane Bisochim had called down on the day that Ahairan was set free. Tiercel wasn't sure what making it rain would involve in terms of magic and even though weather-magic was supposedly the business of Wildmages, he didn't think Harrier knew either.

"I must," Bisochim said after a long moment. "I will." He got to his feet and walked from the tent without another word.

"We'll fix it," Harrier said a little helplessly, looking at Shaiara as she sat beside him. "Someone—"

She took his hand between hers and carried it into her lap. "Harrier, if we do not prevail here and now, there will be no Isvaieni left to know or care whether there is an Isvai left," she said gently.



THOUGH Bisochim said he'd make it rain, the rest of the day passed without any change in the weather. They made camp at dusk, and as usual, Bisochim set the wards and built them a wall of ice. He no longer summoned up the Sandwind each evening—the wind that would have borne the sand upon it would also have raised clouds of choking ash, pulverized it into powder, and filled the air with it. Without the sheep and goats who needed water daily and who were difficult to control in their thirst, the travelers had quickly fallen into the practical habit of asking Bisochim to Call water at midday. They used up a great deal of water on the march, so it was easiest to resupply at the halfway point. And that meant there was nothing to do when they stopped at night save set the tents and the watches and fall into an exhausted sleep.

Tiercel was awakened by a faint rhythmic patter. It took him a while to identify the sound, but then he connected it with cold, and damp, and the smell of wet goat—because the tent was mainly made out of goat-hair. He sat up and looked out the tent-opening.

In the wan blue light of Coldfire, he could see pools of water on the ground.

Rain.

"Time is it?" he asked, sitting up.

"Tenth hour," Harrier said.

Just before dawn, then. They wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. Kave had said in the council meeting that no matter how much they needed to make distance, they should wait out the first several hours of the rain in the tents. Harrier, of course, had never listened to good advice in his life. He'd already gotten to his feet and was poking his head out of the tent. An instant later he ducked back inside with a wordless snarl that seemed to indicate that Kave had been right.

"We're supposed to drink *that*?" he demanded in disbelief. "It's *sludge*." He waved his hand around before wiping it on his undertunic. It was visibly black, even in the dim light cast by the bespelled lantern.

"The rain's washing the smoke and ash out of the air. It should be better soon," Kave said, yawning as he sat up and stretched.

Eugens went to the doorway of the tent and peered out, holding his hands out beyond the edge of the canopy exactly the way Harrier had. He filled his cupped hands with rainwater and brought the liquid to his nose. "Smells almost like tar," he said, sounding curious. "And it's greasy. But . . . Sure. Tar. You're too young to remember the winter the warehouses Docksideside burned, Har, but the East'ing Blow kept the smoke—and the ships—in the harbor. And then it rained, and half the cloth and wool merchants in the City wanted Da's ears. He was about ready to toss their damned shipments into the harbor; said it was their own lazy fault for not getting them off his dock and into their own warehouses."

"I was *not* too young to remember that. You're talking about the Fire of 'Forty-eight. And even if I had been, Da and Cargomaster Tamaricans never let a moonturn go by without talking about it," Harrier said. He sighed, shaking his head silently, and Tiercel knew exactly what he was thinking. It would be hard on Antarans Gillain to lose both his oldest and his youngest son and never know what had happened to either of them. "But nobody had to ride those bales several hundred miles—or drink the rain. So I'd like to know when it's going to be rain—and not mud."

Nobody had an answer for him.

The one advantage to the rain that both Harrier and Eugens agreed on was that it would put an end to the drifts of ash flying everywhere, but—as they found out when the Isvaieni finally emerged from their tents around the Third Hour of Day—when rain soaked down a moonturn's worth of ash-fall, the ash became a grease-slick overlay on the *regh*. Worse, the rain softened the hardpan so that the sharp tent-pegs slipped loose, and nearly all the tents were sagging and half-collapsed before it was time to strike them. And that was only the beginning of their newest problems.

Saravasse—who hadn't had a tent to shelter in—was a muddy brown instead of her usual brilliant red. She snarled at everyone, including Bisochim. The *shotors* hated the uncertain footing. The debris on the sand varied from a grease-slick slurry of ash and rain to deep pockets of accumulated ash that were only wet at the top—so that when a *shotor* stepped into one, the dry ash swirled up from beneath and caked on its legs—to places that were now bare wet sand.

And all the time, the warm, gritty, black-stained rain dripped down and the desert steamed.



BY the end of a sennight the rain was gray-tinged instead of black, and the fallen ash had all been soaked down and compacted. The combination of rain and ash seemed to protect them from attacks by both Balwarta and Ahairan's *atish'ban* insects—few creatures were willing to fly through rain, and to reach them, the *atish'ban* insects would, as far as anyone knew, have to crawl across miles of ash-mud. But Bisochim's conjured storm clouds made the days darker and the nights longer, and while he was holding the spells in place that made it rain, Bisochim couldn't spare the energy to Summon a Sandwind to scour the desert—even if a Sandwind would have been anything more than wet sand.

There were a thousand minor annoyances—the tents weren't waterproof, the fires wouldn't stay lit, the desert robes weren't designed to keep their wearers warm and dry when it was raining—and all of them paled in comparison to the fact that Ahairan took advantage of the fact that they were blind at night and hobbled during the day to attack them with Shamblers, Black Dogs, more Goblins, and Sandwalkers.

They lost nearly five hundred people that sennight.



“OKAY,” Harrier said. “So far, I think Tyr’s plan is working.”

“You have got to be kidding, Har,” Eugens said in disbelief.

“No.” Harrier looked down at the carpet between his feet and leaned over and ran his thumbnail over its surface. You couldn’t see the pattern or the colors anymore—just grayish black—and its nap was stiff with black rain and tracked-in ash. He couldn’t actually remember the last time he’d had a bath, but he’d never really felt dirty until it had started to rain.

Everybody had taken to digging up as much clean sand as they could at the midday halts to scrub down the *shotors* and the *ikulas* and themselves, but there wasn’t much to be done about cloth. It was annoying that all the filth raining down out of the sky couldn’t do something useful like waterproof the tents, but it wasn’t as much a problem of the fabric itself leaking, as of all the on-purpose openings in it. Isvaieni tents had never been designed to keep rain out. He sat back and sighed.

“Bisochim is making it rain,” he said, stating the obvious to his assembled listeners. “I’m taking us directly to Abi’Abadshar—not to Kannatha Well, not to the Dove Road—which might confuse Ahairan, and will certainly get us there faster than we’d get there if we followed the Dove Road and then jogged west.”

“I—I’m sorry, Harrier, I know we’ve covered this before, but . . . If you go straight to this Abi’Abadshar, don’t you lead Ahairan straight there?” Helafin Perizel asked uncertainly.

“Leading her there isn’t the problem, Helafin,” Harrier answered. He knew that Tiercel twitched every time he addressed a Magistrate of the Nine Cities by her first name, but Harrier had good reasons for doing it and he was going to keep on doing it. “She probably knows it’s there—I think we talked about it in front of Vianse Pallocons. What we’re counting on is that she can’t get in and can’t send her Darkspawn in either.”

“Yeah, and there aren’t going to be a lot of us left to get in, either, if this keeps up,” Eugens muttered.

“We’d be taking these losses either way, Gens,” Harrier said. “This way, we have a hope that the rain will be falling clear by the time we really need to rely on it. And the longer it rains, the more of the ash—here and in the Barahileth—gets washed away. And the faster we can go when we really need to.”

“So we have been dawdling thus far? How reassuring,” Liapha said, her voice a dry croak. “Do tell me when we begin to move quickly. I should hate to miss the excitement.”

Liapha was the oldest surviving Isvaieni. She was at least two decades older than the next oldest person in the camp, as far as Harrier could guess from what everyone had said about her family and children. The moonturns of exhaustion and hardship had taken their toll, and Liapha was a skeletal figure. Her cheeks were sunken, the skin stretched tight over her bones, and she could no longer mount her *shotor* without help, something everyone pretended not to see. Harrier dreaded the day that she would announce that the time had come to lay her bones on the sand almost as much as he dreaded the thought of what he would have to do afterward.

“It shall be done, *Ummara* Liapha,” Shaiara said solicitously. “I promise that I shall wake you myself, lest you sleep through it.”

Liapha’s answering bark of laughter was a welcome sound. It was nice to know they could still manage to laugh about things. Today they numbered five thousand three hundred and twenty-four, and they’d only been on the road five sennights.



NO one stood upon the formality of the carpet anymore, because nobody wanted to be out in the rain for one moment longer than they had to be. Harrier and Shaiara went down the line of tents from awning to awning. In the fortnight since it had started raining, Harrier had made up his mind: if he got to choose between raining and hot and not-raining and hot, he’d choose the not-raining alternative every time. By now the entire Isvai was nothing but one big pile of wet sand. *Hot* wet sand, and he felt a thousand times worse than he had on the hottest day he’d spent in the Barahileth.

But if he was miserable, it was nothing to how the Isvaieni suffered in the abruptly-changed climate. At least he was used to rain, if not to hot rain. They weren’t. They bore it with the same stoic patience with which they’d suffered every other hardship since they’d set out from Telinchechitl the first time. Usually he didn’t think about whether the people around him were comfortable or not.

It was different when it was Shaiara.

He’d never meant to fall in love with her. He’d never meant to fall in love at all—at least not for a really long time. He still wasn’t quite sure he had—or *how* he had. What he felt for Shaiara didn’t seem much like what Eugens or Carault or Brelt had described—when Eugens arranged to marry Naneida Corolen after walking out with her for two whole years, or when Carault started seeing Pegorin Karedana seven years ago, or when Brelt offered for Meroine Dyornet and nobody’d even known he liked her.

But at least Nan and Peg and Mero were all Grindon Road girls. Shaiara . . . Shaiara was *Ummara* of the Nazindar, an Isvaieni tribe that lived halfway to the Horn. Harrier could no more imagine bringing Shaiara home to Grindon Road than he could imagine flapping his arms and *flying*.

Of course, Harrier wouldn’t be going home to Grindon Road himself. He’d met Shaiara at least partly because he was a Wildmage, and Wildmages just didn’t live on Grindon Road.

He remembered a time when the thought of paying MagePrices terrified him. Since then, he’d paid out more of them than he could fairly remember. Small ones—like slaughtering the goat for the *ikulas*’s dinner one night and chopping up the meat all by himself. Strange ones—like not entering any tent where Fannas was for eight days and not saying why. Bizarre ones—like walking all of one day, sun-up to sun-down, instead of riding. They’d become an ordinary part of his life, just a thing he did, and he swore and snarled at the Wild Magic the way the Isvaieni swore and snarled at their *shotors*, and he complained (to it and about it) the way Ma complained at Da, while all the while the Wild Magic had been becoming a *part* of him, like his hands or his sight, and it was hard to remember not being a part of it.

But there was still one unpaid MagePrice hanging over his head. He remembered what Kareta’d said very clearly. “*But since you cast so non-specific a spell, and let me choose whether or not to answer, you get to choose your Price. Either come away with me now, tonight, before sunrise, or later, at a time not of your choosing, you must give up the thing you most value in the world.*”

Of course he hadn’t gone with her. He’d still been afraid of the Wild Magic then. He wondered—now—what would have happened if he had. But he’d made the choice he’d made. And that meant that sometime soon he’d have to give up the thing he most valued in the world. It had never been his life. Not since he’d known what the stakes were. He’d wondered—for a while—if what he was going to have to give up was Tiercel’s life, but that had never really made sense. He couldn’t give up something that wasn’t his.

For the last couple of moonturns Harrier’d started to worry that what he had to give up was Shaiara, and again he’d wondered how you could give up something that wasn’t actually yours. But from the moment he’d stood on top of the wall at Saphthruk and looked south to see the fires of Telinchechitl glowing against the night sky, he’d known that no matter how crazy Tiercel’s plan was, he needed to go along with it. Because in the back of his mind, he’d become aware that Kareta’s MagePrice would be the last one he would ever pay, and a small voice whispered: *soon, soon . . .*

“You have become as silent as a Nazindar,” Shaiara said gently.

“Just thinking,” Harrier said absently. “You know, if we were going to have the final showdown with Ahairan at the Lake of Fire anyway, we could have just stayed there in the first place. Everything would have been a lot easier on everybody. But hey. It looks like most of Bisochim’s vision is going to turn out to be true after all.” *At*

least the part about the Lake of Fire being there. And him, and Saravasse, and some Isvaieni.

“So does that mean that the Star-Crowned will return?” Shaiara asked.

Harrier tried not to wince, because of course there’d been *two* dragons in Bisochim’s vision. He stopped under somebody’s awning and Shaiara stopped with him. There was no point in trying to get any more privacy than this. The only person he didn’t actually want overhearing his next words was Tiercel, and Tiercel spent a lot of time with Saravasse these days, even if that meant being out in the rain.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “When I asked her before we left Abi’Abadshar, Kareta told me Ancaladar wasn’t dead. Tyr says he can’t sense the Bond. I can’t imagine Ancaladar being alive anywhere and not having come back after this long, even if he couldn’t fly. I’m just worried that . . . Shaiara, I *know* Tyr’s lying to me. I just don’t know about what.”

Shaiara considered for a moment, her head tilted to one side. “Perhaps the Star-Crowned has returned from wherever he vanished to. And Tiercel does not wish to tell you,” she said simply.

Harrier stared at her, knowing he looked stunned. It made a terrible kind of sense: Bisochim was a Dragonbond Wildmage, and Bisochim hadn’t been able to hurt Ahairan. Tiercel had been trained—by Ancaladar—to fight Demons, but without the Dragonbond, Tiercel couldn’t manage to hold any of the spells he knew in place for more than an eyeblink. But *with* Ancaladar? Tiercel and Ancaladar and Bisochim and Saravasse could probably obliterate her. That was how Mages had destroyed the Endarkened—High Magick and Wild Magic working together. What Harrier didn’t want to believe was that Tiercel had access to Ancaladar’s power and wasn’t telling anyone—because they’d lost fifteen hundred and sixty-five people to Darkspawn who hadn’t had to die if Tiercel could have saved them.

“I really hope not,” Harrier said.

But he wasn’t sure.

Nineteen



To the Throat of the Crucible

ONCE THE CLIFFS of Telinchechitl had been invisible due to Bisochim's spells. On the Isvaieni's southern flight the great black cone of Telinchechitl was visible when they were still semnights away. Clouds veiled its peak—rain, smoke, steam, it was hard to tell. In the middle of the next semnights travel, they began to see black stones studding the sand. The stones had been cast out by the *tehuko*. They were small at first—the size of a thumb-knuckle—but the further south the caravan traveled, the larger the stones lying in the sand became: stones the size of dates, the size of *naranjes*, of melons, of heads, of goats . . .

Before they'd left Saphthruk Oasis, they'd protected their food supplies from everything they could, but they couldn't protect them from the rain. It was bad enough when the barley and oats began to sprout from the constant damp. It was worse when it began to turn black. The Isvaieni had experience with food spoiling, but their experience was limited to fresh foods. When the grain began to sprout, they'd shrugged and used it anyway. When it turned black, they assumed that the dirty rain had just made its way into the storage baskets. The five Armethaliehans would have recognized the difference between dirt and blight—if they'd seen the uncooked grain—but none of them was directly involved in preparing meals. Even Harrier wasn't really suspicious when he was even more miserable after the first meal of badly-spoiled grain, since by then everyone was miserable from the constant wet, but by morning all the *ikulas* weren't just sick, but desperately ill—too ill to be loaded up and ride.

Bisochim Healed them, and Harrier said no one was to feed them, but everyone could see that the animals were fine, and in the tents of the Tunag, nobody had wanted to eat the morning grain porridge. They fed it to their *ikulas*.

Both animals died before Bisochim could be summoned, and now it was obvious what the cause was. The grain was spoiled—all the oats, all the barley. At Kave's suggestion, Harrier tried feeding it to one of the *shotors*. It took longer—three days—but the animal died just as the *ikulas* had. They kept what was left to plant—if it would sprout—because the rootstocks they'd carried with them weren't growing as well as they had before. There was too much water in the sand.

At the same time they realized they'd lost most of their supply of food, Ahairan's attacks tapered off. First one semnight passed without attack by Goblins or Shamblers—and only a few encounters with Sandwalkers during the days—then two, and then they stopped even seeing Sandwalkers. Three, five, ten days passed without any attack at all. But no one was celebrating. They didn't know whether Ahairan had withdrawn her creatures, or if she'd finally found an enemy they couldn't successfully fight.

One too small to see.

Sickness was spreading through the tents. Fever, and racking cough, and it might be easy enough to cure in Armethalieh, but they didn't have any medicine here. All they had was magic, and not enough of that.

It wasn't that Harrier wasn't willing to do Healing spells. But if he did them, he needed people to share the spell-cost, and to ask that of anyone here was to ask them for more than they had to give. That meant Bisochim was the only one who could Heal, and there were hundreds of the sick. And they wouldn't ask to be Healed, not while they knew how much of Bisochim's energy had to go into forcing the rain to fall where no rain had ever fallen.

And so people died.



TEN days after they entered the Barahileth, the surviving Isvaieni reached Abi' Abadshar.

When Bisochim had sent the Young Hunters out into the Isvai on the pretense of searching for the Nalzindar, the tribes had numbered among their tents more than fourteen thousand people.

When Harrier had led the Isvaieni away from Telinchechitl almost half a year ago, he'd led ten thousand one hundred and eighty-three people.

Three thousand nine Isvaieni reached Abi' Abadshar.



IT was midday when they arrived. The ruined city looked strange to Tiercel, and for a moment he couldn't quite figure out why.

There are plants everywhere. And they're in bloom.

He had a hazy memory of what Abi' Abadshar had looked like before—tumbled ruins, a few scruffy tufts of grass. Now there was grass everywhere, and vines twining up over chunks of rain-washed ruin, and the wiry brush with long pale dagger-like thorns that Shaiara had said was called (reasonably enough) thornbush. Its bark was black in the rain and between the thorns it was covered in tiny yellow flowers.

"Doesn't look like she's been here," Harrier said, with a combination of exhaustion and triumph. "Get down, you. You can go eat this place bare once I get my feet on the ground." Once he'd dismounted, Harrier pulled the saddle from his *shotor*'s back and stripped off its bridle. With an irritated grunt, the animal wallowed to its feet and trotted off. "You should go down first," Harrier said, turning to Shaiara, whose *shotor* was kneeling as well. "So they don't—you know—try to kill all of us." He held out his hand to help her off her *shotor*.

"We will go together," she said firmly, placing her hand in his. "There is room for all."

The *shotors* were eager to get at the feast they saw all around them, and even though they were exhausted and half-starved, it was difficult for the Isvaieni to control them long enough to unsaddle and unload them. Once Bisochim would simply have been able to bespell them to docility. Now all his magic was bound into the single spell that kept rain falling where no rain had ever fallen.

When Marap finally came up the steps to greet them, her expression of horror made Tiercel sharply aware of what they all must look like. Not just filthy, but starved.

"Ummara Shaiara," Marap said, her voice uncertain.

"I am happy to be able to return here," Shaiara answered simply. "And once more Abi' Abadshar becomes a sanctuary—this time, for the last of the Isvaieni. I admit, we will be grateful for the chance to be dry."

“Dry?” Marap answered wryly. “Water has fallen from the sky these past ten sennights. I do not think there is any dry place anywhere in either the Isvai or the Barahleth. We have moved to the Fourth Descent so that we might remain dry below. In the chambers of this Descent, there are many ‘doors’ to burn for warmth, but with so many . . .”

“And are there not many Descents, and many doors?” Shaiara answered.



IT took nearly three hours just to get everyone and what items that could be salvaged down into the underground city. When everyone else had gone, Tiercel and Bisochim lingered on the surface. Tiercel was a little surprised at how much he didn’t want to go into Abi’Abadshar. It was the last place he’d seen Ancaladar, and he felt a terrible revulsion at the thought of being here at all.

“You can come inside,” Tiercel said to Saravasse, as the three of them stood outside in the rain. Her scales had long since been washed clean by the constant rain, and she was brilliantly scarlet once more. “This city was built for dragons. Dragons and Elves. Just . . . you have to be careful. I know the levels get wider and more open the farther down you go, so you might want to go all the way down, but you can’t. You mustn’t. Don’t go all the way down to the bottom because it’s dangerous, it’s too dangerous, if you do that—If you do that—” Abruptly he realized he was crying, his tears mixing with the rain. He tried to stop, but the effort only made him start coughing. He yanked the edge of his *chadar* loose and scrubbed at his face. Not that it did a lot of good. It was filthy. Wet and filthy, just like everything else he was wearing.

“You must not fear for her,” Bisochim said, placing a hand on Tiercel’s shoulder.

Tiercel shook his head—angrily, wordlessly—still coughing as he breathed in ragged half-hitching sobs. He couldn’t remember if he’d even cried when Ancaladar . . . left. Why was he crying now? There wasn’t any point. Tears wouldn’t banish Ahairan. Only dying would. A particular death. His. Because any Dragonbond Mage would do for the Firecrown’s sacrifice, but if it worked, they’d need Bisochim’s magic afterward to fix everything Ahairan had wrecked.

“I promise I will be careful, Tiercel,” Saravasse said gently. “You must remember, I have been here before. And right now the city is so very crowded that I would worry about stepping on someone if I went inside. I don’t mind the rain, you know, but you and my Bonded must go inside and make yourselves warm and dry. Should anything happen to you, Harrier would become extremely annoying, you know.”

“I know,” Tiercel said hoarsely. He rubbed at his eyes. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to me either,” Saravasse said gravely. “Now go.”



TIERCEL was actually surprised that all ten floors of Abi’Abadshar weren’t underwater after two and a half sennights of nonstop rain, but apparently the city had been built with excellent drainage, because even the outer courtyard wasn’t filled with water, just wet.

The walls still glowed.

The fact that they did was fortunate, because Abi’Abadshar’s newest refugees had to go somewhere, and most of them were unhappy enough about going down flight after flight of stairs without having to go down them in the dark. They filled the rest of the fourth level, and the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh. The two “safe” levels below that—so cavernous that full-sized dragons could be dwarfed by their immensity—were filled with their possessions. Spread out on the clean stone of the lower levels, they might—eventually—dry.

The only ones who really seemed happy with their new accommodations were the *ikulas* puppies. They romped through the garden level trying to get the older *ikulas* to play with them and charged after the goats with barks of wild abandon.

Tiercel was too keyed-up to rest; he followed Marap as she, the older children, and the Isvaieni women who had stayed behind went from one task to the next. Most of the Isvaieni who’d just arrived were already lying, exhausted, on damp sleeping-mats spread on stone floors, and the sound of coughing echoed from one end of each corridor to the other.

The most heartbreaking thing Tiercel saw—through the long hours of that day—was the sight of women and children looking, not even for their husbands and parents and families, but just for their *tribes*.

Kamazan. Barantar. Binrazan. Thanduli. Gone. There were only a handful of Adanate left. Most of the Kareggi were dead. Most of the Lanzanur. Most of the Kadyastar. Most of *everyone*—there’d been more people just in the Kareggi Isvaieni a year ago than there were Isvaieni in all of the tribes put together now.

He wished he’d never had to see this. He wished he’d never come here.

He wished he’d never been born.



“ARE you saying you can read this?” Tiercel asked.

“It is as I have said before,” Bisochim said distantly. “For many turns of the seasons I walked the Spirit Roads seeking knowledge, and in the doing I saw much of the ancient times.”

They’d been in Abi’Abadshar a sennight now.

Harrier had wanted to leave for Telihechitl immediately, but Shaiara had argued that all of them needed time to regain their strength before the last desperate push to reach the Lake of Fire. When Harrier unwarily said he planned to take only a few people with him—enough to be able to defend against whatever Ahairan might throw at them, but few enough that they could travel quickly—Shaiara had smiled in victory and asked him who he would choose.

The arguments had raged for days, because—to Harrier’s utter disgust and bafflement—every single person here wanted to go. The *Ummarai* had finally agreed upon a lottery system, with Harrier reserving the right to pick outright twenty-five of the hundred people who would go, and to reject twenty-five of the lottery winners outright, requiring a substitute to go in their place.

Tiercel didn’t have any interest in either the discussion or the lottery—he and Bisochim were going no matter who else went—so he’d taken Bisochim into the deepest levels of the underground city. He hadn’t been willing to admit to himself that he was hoping Bisochim could tell him what had happened to Ancaladar.

And how to get him back.

Tiercel drew a deep shuddering breath at Bisochim’s words. “You can read the walls. You know what this is.”

“It speaks of the time of the Three Becoming One,” Bisochim said, running his fingers over the carving on the wall. “Of a time to come when the dragons will no longer have to die. I have been a fool, to unchain a Demon when safety for my Saravasse was here all along.” For a moment he looked so devastated that Tiercel couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

“But we don’t know when this time is going to be, do we?” Tiercel finally asked.

“No,” Bisochim said, sighing. “Great Queen Veliessar Farcarinon—who was both the destruction and the deliverance of the Elder Kindred—and Tannetarie the White—Great Mother of all Dragons—foresaw the time when the MagePrice would at last have been paid for the spells Queen Veliessar cast so that Mages could Bond with Dragons and use their magic, but they also saw that its fulfillment would require a magic not yet in the world.” He moved farther down the wall, his fingers tracing the shapes that looked so much like the glyphs of the High Magick. “The transfer of the Bond . . . once it was a thing done always, for the Elder Kin would ever meddle and mock at any yoke set to bind them. Though there was but one generation of Elven Mages who could claim the Dragonbond, for Great Queen Veliessar Farcarinon vowed in the name of generations unborn to renounce her peoples’ magic for the sake of victory and the Long Peace, until the last child of the Sanctuary of Leaf and Star was dead, the Dragonbonds of the Warhunt Mages could be transferred from Mage to Mage, and so the time of the ancient Dragonbond—before Men, before the Wildmages—endured for nearly two thousand wheels of the seasons.”

Two thousand years, Tiercel thought, stunned. “But how could it—? How could they—?”

“In that age—as in this—each Dragonbond Elven Mage was given to wield a single Great Spell, to be used for but one purpose,” Bisochim said, his face turned toward the wall.

“To transfer the Dragonbond to a new Mage,” Tiercel said slowly.

“Lost, very long ago,” Bisochim said quietly, speaking of the knowledge of Elven Magery. “The Elder Kin did not wish to remember that time. And Men did not know to seek the knowledge. Even I know not if such a spell would be mine to cast,” Bisochim said.

“Even if you could—even if *they* could have—Wildmages didn’t Bond to dragons until the Great War, did they?” Tiercel said. “I don’t think anybody would have had time to find somebody a dragon could Bond to, and cast their Great Spell, before they died.”

“Perhaps it is as you say,” Bisochim said.

No matter how desperately he wanted answers, Tiercel wished now that he’d never brought Bisochim here and showed him the walls. Ahairan had been able to trick him into bringing her into the world because he’d wanted Saravasse to survive after he died. Now Bisochim knew that if he’d only found this place and solved the riddle of the wall carvings, the answer would have been here. Tiercel was about to say something—try to find words to apologize—when Bisochim turned to face him.

“But this is not where your Bonded left you,” he said, and his voice was soft but resolute. “Take me to that place.”



BISOCHIM had spoken so rarely in the half-dozen moonturns since the three of them—he and Saravasse and Tiercel—had rejoined the Isvaieni that Tiercel was always startled when he did. In these few hours they’d been alone together here on the eighth and ninth Descents, Tiercel thought Bisochim had spoken more words than he had in that whole time and in the whole moonturn and a half before that. He’d used to wish Bisochim would talk more. He’d always thought if he’d share his knowledge with them, it might *help*.

He was sorry now he’d ever wished for such a stupid thing.

The walls and floor and ceiling of the Tenth Descent glowed moonbright with cerulean MageLight. The walls were smooth and uncarved, and the floor was as ridged as the windswept desert, so if you let your eyes unfocus a little you could trick yourself into thinking you were outside on the desert at night. The space was so large there was no sense of being enclosed at all.

“No one who has not witnessed those events can understand how savage the first war of Dark against Light was,” Bisochim said quietly. He knelt upon the floor, brushing his fingers across its ridges. “The Dark expected utter victory. The Light was only righteous and worthy in comparison to that which it faced, for even the Elder Kin had many lessons to learn before they could become estimable custodians of the True—of the Balance. And in that ancient day they were powerful and proud. Pride nearly destroyed the Light in them before it could be well-kindled. Power was all that saved them, and all the Peoples of the Light.”

“You know what this is,” Tiercel said slowly.

“Yes.” Bisochim got to his feet. “A door. A way for dragons and their Bondeds to escape. Should a city be attacked by the Endarkened, the Dragonbond would defend it until the last, then make their way to such a place as this.”

“No,” Tiercel said, shaking his head in denial. “I’m sorry. You’re wrong. If that was just some kind of—Of *MageDoor*, I’d know. I’d still sense Ancaladar. And he would have come back! He—”

“Yes.” Bisochim’s voice was barely above a whisper, but his expression held so much pity that it choked the words in Tiercel’s throat.

“He’s dead,” Tiercel said. “That’s what you’re going to say, isn’t it? The magic is old, and it sucked him in anyway because he’s a dragon, and now he’s dead.”

“Not yet,” Bisochim said, and there was still that terrible *pity* on his face and in his voice. “Did the Dragonbond Mages merely flee across the land, they would but bring the enemy upon another fortress unready to repulse them. The Dragonbonds fled also across sennights. Moonturns. Leaving behind no trail that even the magic of the Endarkened could find.”

Tiercel shook his head, trying to make Bisochim’s words make sense. Across moonturns? By magic? The Wild Magic had spells to show what *could* be—that was what Scrying did. The High Magick had spells to show what *had* been: *To Know* and *Recollect* were two of them; he’d read their descriptions even if he couldn’t cast them. Bisochim said he’d looked at the past, so Tiercel supposed the Wild Magic could do that too. But that wasn’t the same as *going* there.

“But—If he went into the past—” *Then wouldn’t there have been two of him there? And wouldn’t he still be here?*

“To the past—or to a time not yet,” Bisochim said. “I cannot say where this door goes, Tiercel. Nor was it ever meant that the two halves of a Dragonbond should be separated by a door such as this. Even with all my Saravasse’s power to call upon, I cannot open it to allow you passage—yet my Beloved could open it with the lightest touch. Dragon and Bonded were meant to pass through together.”

Tiercel knew he ought to say something. Anything. If he could think of something to say, maybe he could come up with the right questions to ask, the questions that would get him the answers that would let him *figure out a way to fix this*. He only realized he was swaying on his feet, about to fall, when Bisochim grasped his arm.

“I am sorry, Tiercel,” Bisochim repeated.

And Tiercel knew then that he couldn’t fix it. If there even *was* a way, there wasn’t time—their whole plan to have the Firecrown trap Ahairan relied on keeping the attention and interest of a Great Power and a Demon. And if Tiercel *did* fix it, and got Ancaladar back, he’d just have to choose between killing Bisochim and Saravasse, or killing Ancaladar and himself.

I’m doing that anyway, Tiercel realized bleakly. *And I’ve made my choice. This way, I just won’t have to look Ancaladar in the face when I do it.* “I know,” he forced himself to say. “It’s not your fault. It isn’t anybody’s fault really.” *That’s really the worst part of all.*



IT was now nearly a fortnight after they’d gotten to Abi’Abadshar, and the war-band was leaving for Telinchechid in two days—well, a day from dawn tomorrow, and it was evening now. Harrier had already used up fifteen of his twenty-five refusals, and made twenty-three of his one-sided choices. Tiercel thought that the Isvaieni treated the whole selection process as some kind of game. It irritated him, even while he knew he should be glad that after the months of horror anyone could still joke

and laugh.

Even here the Isvaieni grouped themselves as they had in the encampments, and so Harrier, Tiercel, Bisochim, and the Armethaliehans, had joined Marap and the surviving Nalzindar in the campsite Marap had made three stories below the garden level. Every time Tiercel looked around, it only served to underscore what a horrible toll Ahairan had taken on all the people of the desert. When he and Harrier had first come to Abi'Abadshar, there'd been thirty Nalzindar. Now there were thirteen, eight of whom were children under the age of nine. None of their parents had survived.

A brace of *sheshu* roasted slowly on the spit. Two of the children watched over them carefully.

Fannas had been one of the people who'd won a place in Harrier's war-band, despite Harrier's rule that no *Ummarai* could seek one. Harrier had rejected his argument that the Kareggi would prosper beneath Adare's leadership as effectively as his, as she'd been a fine *chaharum* to him over the past several moonturns, adding that the Kareggi were no longer so large a tribe as to require a great *Ummara* like Fannas son of Rabbatin to lead them. Tiercel didn't need Harrier to do the math: when the Barantar, the Binrazan, and the Thanduli had left the caravan, the Kareggi had numbered over fifteen hundred people. By the time they'd arrived at Abi'Abadshar, they were less than a third of that number.

Harrier had still refused.

"I still think I should go with you, Har," Eugens said stubbornly. "And you know I'm right." He hadn't been allowed to participate in the lottery, but Eugens had assumed he'd be one of Harrier's choices. But Harrier hadn't picked him yet, and Harrier'd told him earlier today that he wouldn't.

"I won't choose you, Gens. You aren't going. End of story," Harrier said firmly.

"I can fight as well as anyone here," Eugens said stubbornly.

Harrier sighed harshly. "You aren't going. Kave isn't going. Helafin isn't going."

"I wasn't actually intending to ask to go, Harrier," Magistrate Perizel said politely. "But it would be nice to know your reasons."

"There's a chance we'll win," Harrier said, staring into the flames of the cookfire. "I want you to be around to talk to Chief Magistrate Vaunnel and tell her that none of the Isvaieni are to be punished for destroying the *Iteru*-cities," Harrier said.

"That sounds as if it's an order," Magistrate Perizel commented.

"I won't be around to enforce it," Harrier said. "So it can't be an order. Even if I were, I still couldn't. But it's the right thing to do."

"I . . . Wait. Har, why can't you talk to the Chief Magistrate yourself? Where are you going to be? And, you said there's a 'chance' you'll win? I thought this Firecrown promised Tyr he—it—whatever—would lock her up," Eugens said. His voice went from confusion to outrage as he went from question to question.

"We think it will," Harrier said, his voice low. "Even if it does . . . Tyr and Bisochim and I are the bait in the trap. We're the ones she's wanted from the beginning."

"You aren't saying you're going to die. You're my baby brother. I'm not going to let you die. If Ahairan wants somebody, she can take me," Eugens said. When he spoke, he sounded just like Harrier had used to, hostile and angry and looking for a fight.

Harrier laughed, and for a moment Tiercel thought he sounded almost carefree. "She's probably going to take all of us, Gens. That's why I want you here instead of there. Go back to Armethalieh and—" He stopped and looked away. "You know."

"Tell our parents where we were, and what we were doing," Tiercel finished for him. "Tell them we're sorry."



IT was midday. Here in the garden at the top level of Abi'Abadshar's underground world it was warm and wet. After the killing journey to reach this safe harbor, most of the Isvaieni preferred to be warm and dry, so he and Shaiara had the garden to themselves. It was why Harrier had chosen it. He'd given all his refusals—and made all his choices but one—when he asked Shaiara to walk with him.

He was glad to see that the forest had survived the change in the weather. In fact, everything was thriving—the goats, the squirrels, the monkeys, the doves, the chickens, and probably several other kinds of animal he couldn't see. He hoped so. Even using the *shotors* as food, the people at Abi'Abadshar were going to reach the point—soon—when they'd have to rely so heavily on the underground forest and the animals who lived here that they'd simply use them up. But that was next moonturn's problem, and he probably wouldn't live to see next moonturn.

"We leave tomorrow," Harrier said.

"You do," Shaiara agreed. "The drawing of lots is complete."

"Kamar won. I refused him." It had been his last chance to refuse someone a place in the hundred, and Harrier was glad he'd held back so many until the last minute.

"That is a good thing," Shaiara said gravely. "It would be well for the Nalzindar to have their *chaharum*'s wisdom to guide them."

"Liapha won, too. I'm pretty sure she cheated. Anyway, I reminded her that I said no *Ummarai* should draw *or* dice for a place."

"And so I have not," Shaiara said.

"I know," Harrier said.

They walked on in silence for a while, in the direction of the waterfall and the pool. In the open areas, the light was soft and diffuse, but it was dark under the trees without the hot bright sun of the desert day forcing itself through every crack in the stone, so Harrier conjured a ball of Coldfire to show them the way. He remembered the evenings when the four of them—him, Tiercel, Shaiara, Ciniran—would walk down there. He remembered that he'd thought—then—that he was living a life of danger and privation. He hadn't minded, but he'd still thought it.

"And I know—as all know—that you said you would choose twenty-five warriors to ride at your right hand to do battle with the demon Ahairan, and you have as yet chosen but twenty-four. I ask you now: who is to be the last?" Shaiara asked.

They'd reached the pool, and Harrier stopped. Little here had changed. The ancient willow trees still bent low over the water, the carpet of thick moss was still ridiculously soft under foot. The only difference was that the waterfall wasn't a gentle trickle cascading down from above, but a forceful jet of water that spewed straight out of the wall before plashing down just inside the very edge of the pool.

Shaiara stopped beside him, and Harrier turned to face her. "If I choose someone else—and we ride out—will you stay here?" he asked.

She looked up into his face, her dark eyes calm. "No," she said.

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Then I choose you."

"And I choose you, Harrier, for as long as it pleases Sand and Star to grant us," Shaiara answered.



THE war-band left Abi'Abadshar two hours before dawn. Harrier led them eastward, directly away from the Dove Road, only turning south once the sky began to lighten. Despite himself, Tiercel was fascinated at what the daylight revealed as they traveled through the bones of the immense city. Here, the rain-washed outline of long stone roads leading from nowhere to nowhere, edged and sometimes crossed with enormous time-worn columns of stone. There, the regular and precise outline of

what must once have been buildings, though only the foundations remained. Tiercel couldn't reconcile what he saw with what he knew of the gentle Elves who lived in harmony with Nature. Harrier had told him once that Abi'Abadshar was larger than Armethalich. Tiercel couldn't imagine the Elves building something so vast, even to accommodate dragons, but Bisochim had implied that the Elves had been very different once. This was the city that Great Queen Vielessar Farcarinon built for her war with the Endarkened, and that war had been ten thousand years before the second one, which was a thousand years before the third, which was a thousand years before . . .

This one. Because that's what this is. A war. Even if we don't have armies and we aren't exactly fighting the Endarkened and nobody's going to call it "the Fourth" anything.



THE desert as far north as Saphthruk Oasis had been covered with ash. When Tiercel hadn't seen it at Abi'Abadshar, he'd assumed the wind had carried the ash farther north, or else that the rain had washed it away. But when they passed the last of the ruins and got a sight of the open desert, even in the haziness of rain and mist and hot water-filled air, Tiercel could see that it wasn't dun-colored, but black and glittering. The blackness began as precisely as if it had been deliberately placed. On one side of the line there was the rest of the Barahileth—all black—and on the other, there was the ruins of Abi'Abadshar. If they all hadn't been familiar with the debris the *tehuko* had flung skyward at the moment of its birth, they might have been tempted to think that Ahairan had managed to find a way to turn the *regh* itself *atish'ban*. Even so, the sight was enough to make all the Isvaieni—even Zanattar (who'd been the first of Harrier's choices to ride south with them, to Tiercel's surprise)—mutter uneasily.

"Well," Harrier said, "I guess we know where the city boundaries are now."

He'd halted the column just inside the boundary line, inside what must be the edge of the city. They'd taken a hundred extra *shotors*, though they didn't need that many for pack animals, and Tiercel knew Harrier intended the surplus to serve both as food for Saravasse and as a sacrifice to Ahairan's creatures, if that became necessary. But so many riderless animals could be difficult to control under extraordinary circumstances.

They hadn't had any *ordinary* circumstances in over half a year. Tiercel stared at the impossible line of demarcation.

"Why didn't we see that as we came in?" he demanded after a moment. He heard his own voice coming out high and tight with tension, and that was ridiculous. This was only magic. He'd done spells himself. But the even line of blackness had an inhumanity to it that chilled him, as if he were riding through the dead bones of an ancient machine that nobody had ever bothered to turn off. *Which is pretty much the case*, he thought, and shuddered.

"Whatever sort of shield this is, it probably doesn't go much farther north than this," Harrier said. "We're about a league and a half south of the entrance to the underground city now, and about two leagues east. We wouldn't have seen this stuff coming in. Not with visibility as bad as it is in the rain." Harrier made an irritated face. If it hadn't been raining, they could've seen from here to Telinchechitl without any trouble. As it was, they could barely see a few hundred yards at high noon.

"So what do we do?" Tiercel asked.

"Rest here for a few minutes," Harrier said. "If the city's spells are strong enough to keep chunks of rock out, they might keep other things out, too. Either way, we've been riding since the Tenth Hour of Night, so that's five hours now, and one thing we need to know before we go any farther is whether the *shotors* can make it across that stuff without getting too cut up, because I'm pretty sure our boots won't fit them."



THE black material was a mixture of ash, stones, and cinders, but nothing that was likely to penetrate the hornlike calluses of the *shotors*' feet. It crunched loudly beneath them, and the stone fragments mixed with the mud combined the worst features of both mud and gravel. The *shotors* didn't balk, and no one complained.

They quickly found it was impossible to travel by night: black sand and lightless overcast sky made the nights so dark that the *shotors* were unwilling to move, and globes of Coldfire would only make them a potential target without illuminating the ground. It was just as well not only that it was raining, but that it had been raining for three moonturns: the days were brutally hot, but you couldn't die of dehydration when you were trying to keep from *drowning*.

It took them a fortnight to reach Telinchechitl—four days longer than it had taken just the four of them the first time—because Harrier brought the war-band south by a long curving route that angled south and east for a sennight before it began to angle south and west. His intention was to reach the western face of Telinchechitl, not the northern one, and stay far from the Dove Road the entire time. Harrier needn't have bothered with his precautions.

A hundred warriors, Harrier, Tiercel, Bisochim, and Saravasse left Abi'Abadshar.

A hundred warriors, Harrier, Tiercel, Bisochim, and Saravasse reached Telinchechitl.

Ahairan didn't attack them once.

Tiercel was grateful for that, because he couldn't bear to sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he could hear Ahairan's voice inside his mind—whispering, gloating, laughing in triumph—and he couldn't tell anymore whether it was a true vision, or a dream, or whether he was just going crazy (*finally crazy* a helpful part of his mind supplied; and who *wouldn't* go crazy if they had the opportunity after the past year-and-more that he'd had?)

Tiercel didn't tell anybody. Who could he tell, even if he could get the privacy to tell just *one* person and not everybody he was riding with? Bisochim was having enough problems just holding the unnatural weather steady. He'd told Tiercel that the longer he forced the weather out of its proper patterns, the harder it tried to return to them, and the more energy he needed to use to maintain the spell. And not only energy, but attention: when he'd begun, he'd only needed to reinforce the spell once a day or so to keep the weather patterns in place. By the time they'd left Abi'Abadshar, it had been every couple of hours. So Bisochim wasn't doing much sleeping either, and Tiercel still remembered what it was like to go without sleep until your entire body ached for it and you'd do anything to be allowed a few hours rest.

So he didn't tell Bisochim.

And he didn't tell Harrier. He already knew that Harrier didn't trust him, didn't trust *this*. He actually had no idea at all why Harrier had gone along with it, but down deep inside Tiercel was certain that there were things Harrier wasn't telling him either. Important things. Dangerous things. And if he told Harrier about his visions, dreams, nightmares, whatever they were . . . he no longer really knew what Harrier would do. Harrier might leave him in the middle of the Barahileth with the Isvaieni, trusting to his presence to keep Ahairan from slaughtering them, and go on to Telinchechitl with just Bisochim and Saravasse. And Tiercel couldn't let that happen. If they did, the Firecrown would tell them the terms of the bargain Tiercel had made with it. And Bisochim would fulfill it. And Saravasse would die.

When *he* fulfilled the bargain, Ancaladar would die. Ancaladar wasn't dead. Tiercel finally believed that. Ancaladar had fallen through a MageDoor built more than twelve thousand years ago by Great Queen Vielessar Farcarinon to save her Dragonbond Mages from the Endarkened, a door that led across space and through time. And when and wherever Ancaladar came out again, the fact that Tiercel was dead would kill him.

And he had no choice. They'd both been marked for death from the moment they Bonded.

And so Tiercel said nothing to anyone.



THE closer they came to the Lake of Fire, the thicker the fog got, and the larger the rocks were that studded the desert around them. On the evening of the day that the front of the column couldn't be seen from the rear and the ground was strewn with boulders larger than full-grown sheep, Harrier told them they'd reach Telinchechitl the following day.

They had the chance to eat well that last night. They slaughtered a couple of the *shotors* for fresh meat, and there was even *kaffeyah*—probably the last of it anywhere in the entire south—but nobody had much appetite. Zanattar announced that he would see to setting the Night Guards, as Harrier was going to die tomorrow and needed his rest. There'd been a time, Tiercel remembered, when Zanattar wouldn't have dared to joke with Harrier. There'd been a time when Harrier wouldn't have laughed and clapped Zanattar on the shoulder in response, and told Zanattar he was only hoping Harrier died so Harrier didn't go back to Abi'Abadshar to tell Karuffhad about all of Zanattar's shortcomings.

Usually after the camp was quiet Tiercel spent hours standing out with Bisochim and Saravasse. If he'd been keeping himself awake as much as he'd been keeping Bisochim company, nobody'd said anything. But tonight Tiercel went off to his tent when everyone else did. Let the two of them have what privacy they could have tonight. He curled up in a far corner of the tent, his knees drawn up under his chin, and wrapped his arms around his shins, and tried not to sleep. *I'm going to die tomorrow*, Tiercel thought, and tried to care. He was really thinking: *I hope I'm going to die tomorrow*. Because if he didn't, the plan had failed, and he didn't know what they'd do then.

Now that Harrier couldn't stop him from reaching the Lake of Fire if he tried—because Tiercel could *walk* there by himself if he had to—Tiercel finally let himself think about what was going to happen. In one way, he'd been preparing himself to die ever since he'd accepted his destiny—such an utterly ridiculous phrase!—in Karahelanderialigor. In another way, it had kept not-happening for so long that it was hard to believe it was actually going to happen tomorrow. He knew that the Preceptors of the Light said that you didn't miss anything after you were dead, because the Eternal Light didn't work that way. But what if they were wrong? What if being dead was just like being sent somewhere very far away and never being able to come back?

No. It couldn't. The Light was *good*. It wouldn't make you be unhappy *forever*.

Even though he was ready to think about dying now, Tiercel tried not to think about *how* he was going to die, because he was pretty sure that “*gives up his life at My Shrine entirely of his own free will*” translated into “*throws himself into the Lake of Fire while still alive*,” and he only prayed he'd have the strength to do it when the moment came. Thinking about Ahairan—what she'd already done, what she still meant to do—he thought he could. But just because he was willing to give up his life didn't mean there weren't things he regretted leaving behind.

He'd miss his family. But more than that, he'd miss knowing what was going to *happen* to them during all the years he should have been able to share with them—seeing his little sisters and his baby brother grow up. Not getting to know was like having to put down a book in the middle and knowing you were never going to get to finish it.

He'd miss Harrier. He'd miss Harrier-and-Shaiara. He'd watched them *fall* in love, but he would have liked to watch them *be* in love. At least the fact that they'd found each other meant that Harrier wouldn't have to be all alone . . . after. Maybe the Wild Magic would keep Harrier from feeling lonely. Tiercel didn't know. But he was sure Shaiara would take care of him.

There were a lot of things he regretted leaving behind because of what he was going to do tomorrow. But at least—and Light forgive him for the thought—it meant he'd be able to stop missing Ancaladar.



TIERCEL didn't know how much time had passed when he was jarred out of an uneasy doze by people shouting. Harrier—Bisochim—Saravasse. No. Not shouting. *Roaring*. Even Bisochim. Roaring in fury. He staggered to his feet and pushed his way out of the tent.

It had stopped raining.

“Harrier?” he asked in bewilderment.

Harrier was standing in front of the tent in his undertunic and boots, his Selken blades bare in his hands. Shaiara stood with her back to him, an *awardan* in one hand, a cluster of throwing-spears in the other.

All around them were people shouting questions, running out of tents half-dressed but fully armed, slipping in mud and swearing. Several of them were carrying the bespelled cups that Harrier and Bisochim had made to light the tents, because Coldfire burned brightest and stayed longest on stone or metal and there were thousands of gold and silver goblets in Abi'Abadshar. Saravasse bellowed one last furious challenge and fell silent.

“Get back in the damned tent!” Harrier snapped, his face twisted with pain. “She's here!”

Tiercel barely stopped himself from asking “*Who?*” because who else would it be? Ahairan, whose presence a Wildmage could sense and a High Mage couldn't. It was why the War Mages had been created in the first place, so very long ago. He took one cautious step backward, then another. When he was sure the doorway of his tent was clear, he turned and staggered back inside, wondering why Ahairan hadn't attacked yet.

The camp was quiet now, except for the low sounds of Isvaieni voices. Tiercel wiped the mud from his feet, and found his boots, and put them on, and as he did, even the voices fell silent. He got dressed and went outside again. When he glanced up, he could already see night sky and stars. The rainclouds Bisochim had Summoned and held for so long were melting away.

“She only waits, Beloved,” he heard Saravasse say, in a high angry voice. “She and her creatures.”

“For *what?*” Harrier demanded, his voice thick with pain.

“For us,” Tiercel heard himself say. “She wants us to go to Telinchechitl. She thinks she'll win there.”

From out of the darkness he heard a sound he couldn't immediately identify. All at once it resolved itself—like an illusion becoming reality, or a riddle that you solved—into the sound of laughter from a creature that had never been meant to laugh. Ahairan. He shuddered as not-quite memories tried to force themselves into his mind. Harrier moaned in anguish and he heard Bisochim sob.

“Go away!” Saravasse screamed. “Go away! Go away! *Go away!*”

When the sound of Saravasse's cries died away there was nothing but silence. No one in the camp moved, nobody even dared to speak. The bespelled cups glowed brightly where they'd been dropped in the mud, looking like bizarre out-of-place garden ornaments. The longer they all stood there, the colder it got, and Tiercel began to shiver. Toward the west he could see a faint glow on the horizon: Telinchechitl.

“All right,” Harrier finally said, his voice unnaturally even. “Let's go. Saddle the *shotors*. Food, water, weapons. Don't bother with the tents. We'll be back later—or we won't.”

When Tiercel moved, the mud around his feet crackled with frost.



ALL along the column behind him, Tiercel heard the murmured words of the Litany of the Light. He didn't think it would be much help now. He'd worried during this entire journey that Ahairan might not show up. But she had. All he could hope for now was that this would end the way the Firecrown had promised him it would.

Ahairan was mounted on a coal-black *shotor*, and she led an army of monsters. A pack of Black Dogs loped behind and around her *atish'ban-shotor* as if they were hunting hounds. Behind the Black Dogs followed rank after rank of Shamblers. They were the desiccated kind that she called up from the *Iteru*-cities and it was chillingly obvious that Ahairan had completed their failing and mutilated bodies with pieces of Isvaieni dead dug up from the sand. The surface of their bodies swarmed with the glittering forms of *atish'ban* insects. Behind the Shamblers scuttled Sandwalkers (*a herd? a flock? a pack?*) looking like gigantic malformed *jarrari*. Five or ten would have been enough to kill most of the Isvaieni before Bisochim could destroy them. There were at least thirty here. In the sky above, Balwarta soared over Ahairan's line of march. They looked like a hideous mixture of wasp, *jarrari*, and bat enlarged to dragon size.

If she'd wanted to, Ahairan could have obliterated everyone in the column instantly. The Shamblers wouldn't even have had a chance to reach them before her other creatures wiped them out. But she didn't. She merely rode in parallel to them about a mile away, matching her speed to theirs. Tiercel could barely imagine what animals that hadn't been through this entire journey with them—through Shamblers and Sandwalkers and Black Dogs and Balwarta and Goblins—would have done during their morning's ride, but their *shotors* were a little more skittish than usual.

If that terrible processional had gone on for too long, Tiercel thought that someone—maybe even Harrier—might simply have charged Ahairan's army. Tiercel wondered if that was what she was hoping for. He wondered what made her so confident that she was willing to mass such an enormous force and not use it. She could take the entire war-band prisoner—alive, even—and then she'd have what she'd wanted from the beginning. Him, Harrier, Bisochim—and a hundred hostages.

But Ahairan did nothing. And four hours after they'd set out, the war-band arrived at the foot of Telinchechitl.

They reached another ring of demarcation an hour before they reached the *tehuko* itself. This one hadn't been caused by any spell, but by the force of the *tehuko*'s creation and the rain that followed. Inside it there were no boulders, no thick scurf of stones and cinders, only pools of smoke-blackened water, glittering and steaming in the heat of the morning sun, and black mud cracking as it dried.

Beyond the mud, there was stone. It lay dark and smooth in the sun, sloping upward toward the immense height of the *tehuko* itself. The shapes it made in the *regh* gave the illusion that the *tehuko* was the trunk of some enormous stone tree, and in the curves and ridges of the stone over which they rode, Tiercel could see that the stone had run out across the desert like molten wax, slowing and spreading as it cooled and hardened.

At last, they reached the base of Telinchechitl itself. Its sides were as smooth as the trunk of the tree it so oddly resembled, and Tiercel could see no way to get to the top. He had no doubt that he had to get there. The bottom of Telinchechitl wouldn't be the Shrine of a race of creatures made of living fire.

"Now what?" Harrier asked, looking up.

"Now I have to get to the top," Tiercel said steadily. He saw Harrier's eyes flicker, and he realized that somewhere deep inside Harrier must know what he was about to do. But all Harrier said was: "How?"

The hundred Isvaieni—would they call them *The Hundred* someday, would they tell impossible stories about them?—were all crowded around the base of Telinchechitl on their *shotors*, unconsciously trying to put as much distance between themselves and Ahairan as they could. She and her army had stopped at the edge of the stone at the mountain's base. She seemed content simply to wait.

"Saravasse, can you—?" Tiercel asked.

"Climb *that*?" Saravasse asked in disbelief. "Or were you thinking I could just *fly* to the top?" she added caustically. She banged the bandaged stump of her shredded wing against her side in irritation.

Tiercel sighed. It had been worth a try. He would have preferred it, since it would have meant he could have gone up with only Saravasse as company. "Can you make a staircase?" he asked next, turning to Bisochim.

"It shall be done," Bisochim answered grimly.

Bisochim dismounted from his *shotor*. When Bisochim dismounted, Tiercel did too, and—as he noticed with a mixture of resignation and disquiet—Harrier and Shaiara did too. Harrier and Shaiara began arguing with each other in low voices. Tiercel turned away and watched the side of the mountain. His heart was beating fast now, and despite the heat—from the sun in the sky, from the stone beneath his boots—he felt cold. He was glad he hadn't eaten anything before starting out—no one had—but he was suddenly terribly thirsty. It seemed like too much trouble to get his waterskin off his saddle, though.

At first there was nothing to see, though Bisochim was standing in a pose of fierce concentration. Then suddenly a wave of nausea struck him, forcing him to his knees as he gasped in surprise. Tiercel was so exhausted, so focused on what he was about to do, that it actually took him a moment to realize that this was *normal*. Wild Magic and High Magick just didn't get along.

The rock was hot enough to burn his hands. Not because it hadn't cooled from its liquid state, but because rock in the Barahileth got this hot.

"Idiot," Harrier said fondly, pulling him to his feet. "How are you going to talk to the Firecrown if you can't even stand up?"

I'm not going to talk to it, Har, Tiercel thought. He clutched at Harrier's arm, gasping for breath, too dizzy and sick to stand under his own power. Waves of chill and fever wracked him, and all he wanted to do was just *lie down*. . . . But when he heard the rattling cascade of pebbles bouncing down the mountainside and felt a stone ricochet off his leg, Tiercel opened his eyes and looked up. Part of the edge of the mountain's top was crumbling away. As Tiercel watched, suddenly a bright golden spill of rock came flowing down the side of the mountain.

Bisochim didn't move, and Tiercel couldn't. Glowing rock poured down the side of Telinchechitl like syrup out of a jar, and only when Tiercel opened his mouth to shout a warning—though everyone else was watching, just as he was—did he realize that he didn't feel any heat at all.

The stream spread and thickened as it flowed downward, and now Tiercel could see that the rock wasn't simply flowing down through the crack in the top of the mountain, but actually streaming up over the lip above, as if Bisochim's spell was somehow pumping the liquid rock out of the Lake of Fire. When the torrent of rock reached the bottom, there was so much of it, glowing so brightly, that he had to look away. But there was still no heat.

"Nice," Harrier said. Tiercel couldn't tell whether he was impressed or disapproving.

As the light from the rock began to dim, Tiercel realized his nausea and dizziness were fading with it. When he felt steady enough to stand on his own, Tiercel stepped away from Harrier and opened his eyes. In place of the smooth face of Telinchechitl, there was a staircase leading up the side of the mountain. It was a perfectly ordinary stone staircase—except for the fact that it glowed red-orange with heat. Whatever Bisochim had done to keep them from being fried by the molten stone had ended when his magic had—the staircase was hot enough that all of them but Saravasse moved back.

"A few moments more, and it will be cool enough that you may walk upon it," Bisochim said.

"How did you *do* that?" Harrier demanded.

Bisochim smiled faintly. "Magic," he answered.

Harrier glanced over his shoulder. Tiercel followed his gaze. Ahairan still hadn't moved. The Black Dogs were all lying down now, panting in the heat. The fact that they could behave so much like real dogs made Tiercel want to cry, and he didn't know why. He thought of Pangan, of how the *ikulas* had been a distant cousin of these creatures, only Pangan was a Child of the Light just as the Isvaieni themselves were, and Ahairan's creatures had been tainted and twisted in the moment of their

creation. He wondered if—deep inside—the Black Dogs remembered what they'd been meant to be.

Behind the Dogs, the Shamblers stood motionless. They glittered in the sunlight as the insects they carried crawled over them. The only movement on the desert was the Balwartas soaring in lazy circles high above.

"I want you to stay here with Zanattar," Harrier said, and for a moment, Tiercel thought Harrier was talking to him.

"Then 'want' must be your master, Harrier, for I shall not," Shaiara answered.

"If you'd just—"

"If I would just listen to your excellent reasons to do as I am bid? The Blue-Robes counsel. They do not command," Shaiara informed Harrier.

"Just because *I'm* going up the side of this stupid *tehuko* doesn't mean you have to!" Harrier snarled. "Ahairan's out there!"

"So it will be much safer if I am as far away from her as possible," Shaiara answered inarguably.

"Wait," Tiercel said, turning back to face them. "You aren't planning to come to the top *with* me, are you?"

"Sure I am," Harrier said blandly. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Well . . . because you shouldn't, that's why," Tiercel said. He looked hopefully at Shaiara, but she shook her head, refusing to argue for him. "This is something I—"

"I lied to you," Harrier said quietly.

"I—What?" Tiercel said.

"I lied to you," Harrier repeated patiently. "Remember Kareta?"

"She's a unicorn," Tiercel said. He glanced toward Ahairan's army—no movement—and toward the staircase. Bisochim shook his head; it wasn't cool enough to climb yet.

"Yes," Harrier agreed patiently. "Our friend Kareta, the unicorn I Called to ask about Ancaladar. There was MagePrice for that. I told you it was a light one. I lied to you."

He'd always known that Harrier had lied about something. But if it was this—

"I, well, you—what was it?" Tiercel stammered.

"A heavy one. I haven't paid it yet. I'm going to the top with you," Harrier answered.

"I will go as well," Bisochim said. He placed a foot on the lowest step experimentally, then nodded in satisfaction and began to climb.

Harrier sighed in resignation. "I thought you would."



IT was a long climb to the top, and when Tiercel had imagined it, he'd imagined being alone. He hadn't thought it would be all five of them, because Saravasse was following Bisochim up the staircase as well. The stairs were cool enough to walk on, but they were still hotter than the ordinary rock, and *that* had been hot enough that he could feel it through the soles of his boots. Tiercel tried not to imagine what was coming, but he was terrified. The Firecrown had said he had to give up his life "of his own free will," and Tiercel wanted to be willing, but what if being afraid of how much it would hurt meant that he wasn't? How could he know? He could die and it could all be for nothing.

Stop it, he told himself fiercely. If you're thinking like that, you're thinking what Ahairan wants you to think. The Demons are the ones who care whether or not you're scared. The Firecrown doesn't understand feelings at all. It won't even notice.

He felt a little better after that.

"You think I don't know what you're planning to do," Harrier said, when they were more than halfway up. "But I do. And I'm saying you haven't thought it through. What if it doesn't work? What if you're wrong? And what if it *does* work?"

Tiercel clenched his hands into fists and ducked his head. If he hadn't, he might have tried to push Harrier off the staircase. *Now? You're bringing this up now?*

"That would be a good thing, right? Not that I know what you're talking about," Tiercel answered, when he had his voice under control again. He knew what Harrier was doing. Harrier was doing what Harrier had done for as long as the they'd known each other: poking him, prodding him, trying to get him to lose his temper, lose his head, *react*.

The stakes were too high for that this time.

"Sure it would—if Ahairan's the only Demon out there. How do we know what she's been up to? How do we know the Firecrown isn't going to cheat? How do we know that binding her is really going to *bind* her? She wasn't even *here* when she caused all the original trouble—and with you and Bisochim gone, all the things she's called up will still be out there, and I'd just like to point out that after they wipe all of us out, they're going to go looking for other things to wipe out," Harrier said, using his most irritating "being-reasonable" voice.

"Not Bisochim." The two of them had reached the top. The heat was nearly intolerable, and Tiercel knew he and Harrier couldn't spend much time here. Well, they'd both be leaving soon. Just not by the same path. "Just me."

The staircase ended in a flat platform. It was as wide as the staircase itself, and perfectly square. Shaiara and Bisochim had stopped several steps below, taking as much shelter from the heat as they could. Tiercel looked out across the Firecrown Shrine. A lake of liquid rock bubbled and boiled perhaps a hundred feet below the platform. A furnace-hot wind blew over him and Harrier, pushing them back from the edge of the platform. This wasn't the Lake of Fire from Tiercel's visions, but seeing it gave him a shock of recognition just the same. It was here it had all begun. Here was where it would end. He didn't see the Firecrown anywhere. Maybe it was down there. In the lake.

"Just you." Harrier's voice was flat. "Really."

They stood on the platform, facing each other. The height was almost like seeing the world from the back of a dragon, but Harrier was focused too intensely on him to take advantage of it. Tiercel had seen, though. His winning argument. And Ahairan had given it to him.

"A Dragonbond Mage to seal the bargain—power the spell—I don't know. It could be Bisochim or me, the Firecrown doesn't care. But if it's Bisochim, Saravasse dies too. You've said yourself that Bisochim's better at magic than I am, and you'll need that. So it's me. Har, we're out of time. We have to take the chance. Look."

Harrier took him by the arm before he looked away—as if he thought Tiercel might be intending to pull one last trick while his attention was diverted. But it wasn't going to be necessary. From their vantage point here at the top of Telinchechitl, in the crystalline brightness of the morning light, they could see the Dove Road. Advancing down it was a long line of Isvaieni.

Hundreds. Thousands. Everyone they'd left behind in Abi'Abadshar.

Twenty



Bones in the Desert

THEY COULD SEE Ahairan still waiting patiently with her monsters. Tiercel imagined he could hear people sobbing and babies crying, but he was too far away for that. Some of the Isvaieni coming up the Dove Road were riding *shotors*. Some were stumbling along on foot beside them. There were animals following them—goats and sheep and *ikulas* and some that Tiercel couldn't identify at this distance. Ahairan must somehow have gotten every living creature to leave Abi'Abadshar and come to her.

"There she is," Tiercel said savagely. "Right over there with her Darkspawn army, and all I have to do to stop her is *die*. I've always known I was going have to die for this—you have too."

He heard Harrier drag in a long shuddering breath. "Yes. Be quick."

Tiercel nodded and closed his eyes. *I do this freely and by my own will. I choose this.* He took a step toward the crushing heat.

And suddenly the lack—the crippling *absence*—in his mind was filled between one heartbeat and the next.

Ancaladar! he shouted inside his mind.

Bonded, I am here—I am here!

Tiercel felt the roiling turmoil in Ancaladar's mind—to be in the depths of Abi'Abadshar one moment and then, a heartbeat later, falling through the open sky. From Tiercel's thoughts Ancaladar took the knowledge of how much time had passed. For Ancaladar it had been only an instant—stepping onto the stone of the Tenth Descent, a flash of light—then falling through the sky, the confused desperate scramble to spread his wings and *fly*, casting about frantically for his Bonded—

For Tiercel it had been more than half a year. Alone. Crippled. Incomplete. Grieving. Lost. He could feel Ancaladar's bewilderment, determination, *anger* as if they were his own emotions—and mixed through them, mirrored in Ancaladar's mind and returned to his, the incredulous joy he felt to be re united with what he'd thought lost to him forever. He knew he'd started crying, but the heat of the Lake of Fire dried his tears as soon as they formed. He'd wanted this for so long. Memories of Ancaladar had been what he'd clung to when everything else hurt too much to think about. Moments of stolen joy and friendship in the depths of horror and despair. Now Ancaladar was flying westward as fast as he could—he knew he was somewhere in the east, so far distant that in all his centuries of life he'd never been here—but it didn't matter how quickly Ancaladar flew toward Telinchechitl. He'd never reach it. Tiercel would be dead in a few moments. Ancaladar would die with him.

He felt Ancaladar's love enfold him for what would be the last time. *Yes, Bonded. Yes. This is the end we were meant to have, you and I.*

Tiercel took another step toward the edge of the platform.

"Oh, Light, no. Please," he heard Harrier say.

The anguish in Harrier's voice made him turn, made him look, because Tiercel knew that Harrier had made his unhappy peace with his sacrifice and wouldn't protest against it. But when Tiercel looked back out over the desert, he saw that the Black Dogs were running toward the spellbound Isvaieni still trudging obliviously up the Dove Road. Zanattar and the war-band were on their way toward them—they'd seen the column of Ahairan's helpless victims when Ahairan had dropped her spells of concealment, just as Tiercel had—but even with their head start, Zanattar's riders couldn't reach the other Isvaieni before the Black Dogs did. And all they could do was die beside them.

It was reflex—futile, stupid reflex—that made Tiercel encircle the pack with a wall of MageShield. It would only hold until he died. And now Harrier knew.

"Ancaladar," Harrier said, almost as if he were praying. "He came back." He turned and began to walk toward the Lake of Fire, his face set.

Tiercel grabbed him. "No!" he shouted. "Har! It won't work! You can't! The Firecrown's sacrifice has to be a Dragonbond Mage!"

Harrier struggled to get loose while not throwing both of them into the *tehuko*. Tiercel didn't want to hope that Ancaladar's return meant that now he and Bisochim could destroy Ahairan in the way the ancient Mages had destroyed the Endarkened. What if he was wrong? If they failed, he didn't think the Firecrown would give him a second chance to fulfill the bargain he'd made.

He didn't think he could nerve himself up to do this a second time.

He was working so hard to hold onto Harrier, to hold the spell penning up the Black Dogs in place as long as he possibly could, that he missed the moment when Bisochim climbed the last of the steps to the platform.

"No—wait! No—*don't!*" Tiercel cried. "Ancaladar came back! You saw! We can stop her without this!" He tried to get to Bisochim, but now it was Harrier who wouldn't let go of him. "*Don't!*" Tiercel shouted again.

But Bisochim ignored him. He walked without hesitation to the edge of the platform, then turned to look back toward the staircase where Saravasse stood. She raised her head proudly.

"Yes!" she cried. "Beloved!"

Bisochim turned and flung himself from the lip of the platform.

"A Dragonbond Mage. One who goes willingly," Tiercel whispered, his voice thick with tears.



FROM the moment he'd found out that the Lake of Fire was back at Telinchechitl, Harrier had suspected that *somebody* was going to get thrown into it, and he'd doubted it would be Ahairan. He'd known all along that Tiercel knew more about the "bargain" he'd made than he was saying, and Harrier had suspected that the payment for the Firecrown's cooperation would be Tiercel's life and Bisochim's. He knew more about the Great Powers than Tiercel thought he did—wasn't Great Ocean one of them, the last and greatest?—and he knew that the Great Powers were cruel, and merciless, and always hungry. Bisochim had woken the Firecrown up, and Tiercel had asked for its help, and the Firecrown would exact payment. It wouldn't be fair to Saravasse, but she'd be joining about ninety thousand other people who hadn't gotten a lot of fairness recently.

What Harrier had been most afraid of, in the long sennights between that moment and this day, was that what Tiercel meant to do here *wouldn't work*. Because if he and Bisochim did it—and it didn't—Harrier would be the only Mage left in the Isvai, and he wasn't sure he could hold out against Ahairan by himself. He'd hated the relief he'd felt when he'd found out the Firecrown's sacrifice only had to be Tiercel, but it hadn't been *much* relief. Kareta had warned him moonturns ago that his MagePrice would be heavy. He'd been waiting a long time to pay it, and when he'd stood on top of the wall at Saphthruk and seen the fire in the distance, he'd known he'd pay it at Telinchechitl. He'd always known that paying it meant giving up the thing he most valued in all the world, but in the long sennights since he'd taken up the Three Books, he'd come to love and hate and fear and trust the Wild Magic. It had let Bisochim kill all the other Wildmages in the desert as part of its unknowable purpose. What would it ask *him* to do?

When he'd seen the bespelled Isvaieni, Harrier had felt the crushing sense of *warning* that meant his time to pay MagePrice had come, but he still didn't know what it was. Then Tiercel had cast a spell—a *big* one, no Mage-Light or Fire—and Harrier had realized that Ancaladar was back.

He saw Tiercel hesitate on the edge of the *tehuko*—and nobody wanted to die, especially by jumping into a lake of liquid rock—but someone had to, and maybe the Firecrown would accept him even if Harrier didn't have a dragon. Only when Tiercel dragged him back, shouting at him that he wasn't good enough—and Harrier wondered in horror whether what he had to do was pull *both* of them over the edge—the fine points of his MagePrice were revealed to him.

You must Bond with a dragon.

Harrier didn't know where he could *get* a dragon—let alone how Bonding with one equaled giving up what he most valued—and if somebody didn't go over the edge of the *tehuko* right now Ahairan was going to not only wipe out the last of the Isvaieni but them, too—when suddenly it didn't matter.

Bisochim made the sacrifice, and Saravasse was alone.

Harrier had always thought that dragons vanished at the moment their Bondmates died—or at least *died*. On the other hand, Ahairan had sent one of her Balwarta toward the top of Telinchechitl when Bisochim had started up the steps, and Harrier was staring right at it, and it was hanging motionless in the air, and its wings weren't moving at all.

Time had stopped.

Then suddenly its wings flapped down, and Harrier could feel Tiercel gripping his arms, and having a dragon—especially one who hated him—was really going to *suck*, but paying his MagePrice meant that Saravasse didn't have to die too, and he was tired of *everybody around him dying*. He tried to pull away from Tiercel to get to Saravasse, but Tiercel wouldn't let go of him. The pressure of unpaid MagePrice was crushing him to the point that Harrier thought he might die when Saravasse did—

And then he wasn't thinking anything at all.



THIS was why he'd been born a High Mage. This was why the Wild Magic had sent him to Karahelanderialigor and given him Ancaladar. This was why it had made Harrier into a Knight-Mage. This was why he and Harrier and Ancaladar had been sent to Abi'Abadshar, why Ancaladar had been taken from him, why Ancaladar had been returned how and when he had, even why Ahairan had set her trap-spell on Saravasse. All for this moment.

In Abi'Abadshar, Bisochim had told him about the moment of the Three Becoming One, a prophecy that couldn't be fulfilled until a form of magic unknown in Great Queen Viellessar Farcarinon's time entered the world. The High Magic.

Tiercel's magic.

Ancaladar had prepared Tiercel to fight a Demon; Ancaladar had prepared him to seek every possible advantage in the battle, even listening to whatever unguarded thoughts his enemy might have. The curse and the glory of the High Magick was that it could be used for any purpose—Light and Dark and Good and Evil meant nothing to a magick that was nothing more than a machine in the hands of Men. The spell-to-be that Harrier radiated sent chill waves of nausea through Tiercel, but he steeled himself against it as he would have forced himself into battle with Ahairan. He plunged himself into Harrier's magic and cast a spell of his own—on Harrier. He wasn't a Wildmage who needed to ask permission of those he bespelled before he acted. In that single moment, Tiercel understood the terrible power and temptation of the High Magick, and why the ancient High Mages had been so feared and hated. He could not promise that he would always—or ever—ask permission to cast his spells. But he would always understand the terrible responsibility his freedom carried.

Now he could feel the full weight of Harrier's MagePrice as if it were lightning gathering itself to strike. The raw touch of the Wild Magic filled Tiercel's mouth with bile, but in that instant, he knew everything that Harrier did about his MagePrice—and he knew things that Harrier didn't. He knew that whether Harrier wanted to or not, he was about to Bond with a Dragon. He knew that the Wild Magic would allow Harrier to offer Saravasse the Bond; but that Saravasse could—*would*—reject the Bond Harrier offered. She was injured, grief-stricken, spell-trapped by Ahairan. She'd refuse, the last precious seconds of her life would trickle out, and the magic that was all that she was would be unbound everlastingly.

And to pay his MagePrice, Harrier *had* to Bond. Now. He could force Saravasse into a Bond against her will—or he could refuse to pay his MagePrice. To do either would destroy him as a Wildmage.

But there was another way.

There was another dragon.

Ancaladar had already changed Bonds once, just as the ancient Elven dragons had. He wasn't injured. And he wouldn't be giving up Tiercel to do it—that was what the Prophecy meant. *Three become One*. It could work because the Bond formed between Dragon and Mage through the magic itself, or the possibility of it—and the High Magick and the Wild Magic were utterly different in every way there was.

They could do this, High Mage and Knight-Mage and dragon together. It was time, at long last.

Are you ready? Tiercel asked. Ancaladar didn't need to be present in order to Bond with Harrier. Tiercel was.

It will be interesting, Bonded, Ancaladar replied.

Tiercel laughed wordlessly—and cast the second spell that swept the imminence of Harrier's MagePrice into the Dragonbond with him and Ancaladar.

And Three became One.

Tiercel remembered the moment he'd Bonded with Ancaladar—but Ancaladar's was an ancient, disciplined mind. Ancaladar had lived as half of a Dragonbond for a millennium before the day he Bonded with Tiercel. And from the moment Tannetarie the White had made her Pact and the first dragon had been born, all dragons had been *meant* to Bond.

Harrier's mind was a place of rage and confusion. He had only the vaguest understanding of magic as Tiercel knew magic—and he only knew it as something to be used to attack. Linking himself to Harrier's mind was like flying into a Sandwind. Naked. In the first instant of Bonding, Tiercel felt Harrier's shock as the spell struck him—his futile attempt to form some sort of defense against what he knew was magic and what he thought must be a Demonic attack—his realization that it was a Dragonbond—his wild struggle to reach out to Saravasse instead—his furious surrender to the Wild Magic and the seal of MagePrice paid—and oh, all the times that Harrier had spoken of paying MagePrice, he'd made it sound like a transaction that was over-and-done-with, and in this moment of fusion, Tiercel understood that

when you *paid* MagePrice it changed you forever. It was a thing that was never finished—not like a spell of the High Magick that could be cast and forgotten.

He felt the moment when Harrier realized what he'd done, and—mixed with Harrier's incredulous joy at the Dragonbond, as the friendship Harrier had shared with Ancaladar became something infinitely richer and deeper—Harrier's outrage. Not with Tiercel—Tiercel understood that in an instant—but with the Wild Magic itself. Tiercel grasped in the moment that Harrier did, in the moment of Harrier's mutinous surrender, that his MagePrice was not to Bond with a dragon, but to Bond in this tripartite fusion of mind and memory, magic and will, paying the MagePrice of an ancient Elven Queen, and in doing that, surrendering his freedom, his solitude, his autonomy—forever.

And in Harrier's acceptance of his MagePrice—paid not gladly, but willingly, just as Tiercel had meant to honor his bargain with the Firecrown—he felt Harrier's grief at knowing Tiercel would always blame himself for Bisochim's death. It was a perfect union: not only of the High Magick and the Wild Magic, but of minds as well. In that one timeless moment of awareness, of joining—not only with Ancaladar, but with each other as well—the two young Mages each realized something neither had known until that moment.

You've been getting this magic stuff all wrong, Harrier said.

No. You have, Tiercel answered.

From the moment he'd realized he was a High Mage, Tiercel had assumed that he'd been given his Magery in order to fight a war against the Dark. But when the War Magick became the High Magick millennia before, it had expanded beyond the arts of war. Though never a magic of the natural world, it had still been used for healing, for the diagnosis of ills, for the discovery of new knowledge, to uncover hidden truths. Tiercel's true strengths lay in building, not in destruction, in identifying problems in order to solve them through peace, not force.

And Harrier was a Knight-Mage, and so he'd believed that he had to use his Knight-Mage gifts to fight wars and kill people. He could if he needed to, but his greatest strength lay in analyzing things. He could improve a city's defenses, but that was because he wanted to make them *work better*: he could do the same thing to its flour mill, if anyone asked him to.

You mean that both of us are supposed to make everybody happy and healthy? Harrier demanded in wordless indignation.

Sure. I'll tell them that they don't need to argue with each other. You fix the underlying problem, Tiercel answered.

Won't work here.

I have an idea . . .

The experience of accepting and changing the Dragonbond into something new and wonderful seemed to go on for hours—but less than a heartbeat passed before both Tiercel and Harrier opened their eyes. Even so, Saravasse's form was already beginning to shimmer into dissolution.

"Heal Saravasse!" Tiercel cried.

Healing spells weren't a part of the High Magic, but they *were* a part of the Wild Magic, and by now Harrier knew them well. He ran to the staircase, plunging down it, past Shaiara, past Saravasse's head, halfway along the length of her neck where it lay stretched at full length along the staircase. He placed both hands against her neck. Ancaladar's near-infinite power was his to draw on. Tiercel's skill showed him how.

Nothing like this had ever been done. Not in the time of Tannetarie the White, not in all the centuries afterward. To keep the severed half of a Bonded pair alive simply by pouring Healing energy into them. . .

It could never have worked if Tiercel had not spent days of horror holding his MageShield around the walls of Tarnatha'Iteru when every bone and muscle in his body cried out for him to quit. To surrender. It could never have worked if Harrier had not spent moonturns in the Isvai, pushing body and mind to their limits each day and each night, keeping the Isvaieni alive by nothing more than his determination that they would live.

Neither of them had given up—not then—not now—not once, in the thousands of battles that had brought them to this day.

And so it worked.

The makeshift ban dage on the stub of Saravasse's mutilated wing ripped free as the wing grew back in a heartbeat. Harrier heard Shaiara gasp in surprise and horror—she knew that by casting a spell on Saravasse Harrier had just opened his mind to Ahairan's—but Harrier couldn't spare any of his concentration to explain what was going on. He might have been dead in the next moment, and at Shaiara's hand, but Shaiara was forced to throw herself flat on the staircase as Saravasse screamed her displeasure and beat her wings furiously like an angry chicken (a very *large* angry chicken). Before Saravasse could either take to the air or *bite* him, Harrier straddled her neck and held on. He hissed with pain as Ahairan seized the opportunity he'd given her to thrust her way into his mind.

But it wasn't his mind alone any longer. It was his, and Tiercel's, and Ancaladar's.

And a Wildmage and a High Mage together could kill a Demon.

Light and Darkness. Life and Death. Pain and Pleasure. Sickness and Health. Knowledge and Ignorance. Famine and Bounty. Fire and Ice. Ocean and Desert. Summer and Winter. All opposites, but all contained within the Wild Magic, because the Wild Magic was a magic of Balance.

It was *the* Balance. The Great Balance.

The Darkened, the Demons—what they were, what they wanted, what they served—were the opposite of all these things at once. The Peoples of the Light called them "Darkness" and "Shadow," but those were names bestowed out of fear, from their own child-times, when they had been small soft helpless creatures who feared the night.

The Demons' true name was *Void*.

Absence.

Lack.

That was why the presence of Ahairan and its kind—it was no more female than a rock was female—caused all those Sealed to the Three Books utter and absolute agony. The Wild Magic was the sum of All That Was: its Wildmages were charged by it with the great work of being its living eyes and minds and hands. The absence-and-opposite of all they knew and served was an assault on every sense at once.

In the depths of a desperate war, *Void* had driven too many of them mad, and so they'd embraced it. Those who'd seen that happen without true knowledge of the enemy they fought spoke of the Wildmages Falling to the Dark.

And so, out of that desperation, the War Magick was born.

It was a magic that sealed itself off from the world: from the Wild Magic, from the ancient music of trees and stars, from the Great Balance itself. The War Magick was a thing of rules and procedures and carefully-calculated formulas, for its Mages were insensible to the instincts that would let them hear MagePrice and reckon SpellCost.

But neither could they sense the *Void*.

The Magic of Balance and the Magick of Laws diverged quickly, for the War Mages crafted spells that no Wildmage could. And in the blending of the two, *Void* found, not death, but unmaking. . .



WHEN he remembered the brief terrible battle later, Harrier was able to put the events into their proper order: this, then this, then this. Even with Ancaladar's help, though, he was never sure which parts he did, and which were Tiercel's.

Lightning crackled out of a cloudless sky, the bolts searing down with absolute precision, slamming a dozen Balwarta to the desert floor.

The wall of MageShield Tiercel had cast around the Black Dogs blinked out and reformed in an instant to encircle Ahairan and her entire *atish'ban* army, trapping them inside. It was only to protect the Isvaieni while the actual fight was going on. Ahairan was *already* out. The battleground was their minds, his and Tiercel's.

And oh—Light and Darkness—he'd managed to go fifteen entire years thinking Tiercel didn't have a temper. He couldn't imagine being that angry and still thinking in that cold, *calculated* way. Because Tiercel was. Harrier could feel it.

You can let her through, now, Har. I'm ready for her.

It was only then that Harrier realized he'd been holding out against Ahairan with all his strength while she pried and picked and battered at his mind, taunting him and drowning him in foulness. He let go—like a drowning man slipping below the water—and Ancaladar's mind gathered him to safety.

He felt Ahairan's mind brush past his—thinking she was claiming him, thinking she'd won—to run right into Tiercel's.

You don't get to do this to me. You don't get to do this to my friends. You don't get to do this to my world. I reject you. I deny you. You ARE NOT.

It was like watching something being folded up in every direction at once—although that wasn't possible, and Harrier wasn't watching anything at all. Tiercel was putting everything he had into doing whatever he was doing to Ahairan. Harrier was doing everything else that needed to be done.

If he stopped Healing Saravasse—even for an instant—Saravasse would simply *stop*. If he let the MageShield drop, the Sandwalkers and the Black Dogs would reach the Dove Road and the Isvaieni there in instants. He'd remember—later, when there was the leisure for things like that—that MageShield wasn't his spell to cast, and even if it were, he hadn't cast this one. And—later still—it would occur to him to be grateful that “stubbornness” was the defining quality of a Knight-Mage. But now his eyes were closed and his face was pressed against the hot scales of Saravasse's neck, and even so he could see that every living creature of Ahairan's inside the MageShield was going mad.

The Sandwalkers tried to tunnel their way out of their prison, but the Shield had been cast below the desert as well as around it. They turned on each other, and upon the Black Dogs as well. They cut the Shamblers—the only things that were unaffected by the frenzied need to escape—to pieces.

At the same time that Harrier was holding MageShield against all attacks, he was pouring torrents of Healing into Saravasse, since the only reason Saravasse *still* hadn't gone wherever abruptly unBonded dragons went was because he'd never stopped Healing her. Holding either spell in place by itself—the MageShield around that army of *atish'ban* monsters, or the torrent of Healing he was pouring into Saravasse—would have taken more concentration and strength than Harrier could ever have imagined having. He was only a channel for Ancaladar's power, but even doing that made him feel as if he were being battered by an endless storm, and no harbor in sight.

There were a hundred witnesses to that battle. The moment Tiercel first cast MageShield against the Black Dogs, Zanattar's Isvaieni had stopped to stare in wonder. None of them said—afterward—that they heard anything in those next moments other than Saravasse's shrieks of rage and the howls of the Black Dogs as they died.

But Harrier and Tiercel both heard Ahairan screaming.

At first it was with fury. When she—*it*—began casting spells—at Tiercel, Harrier, Saravasse, the Isvaieni—Tiercel simply blocked them. He could have closed the MageShield completely, but if he had, he wouldn't be able to get *in* at the Demon, either. And Harrier could feel that Tiercel was doing *something* to Ahairan—something complex and powerful, requiring as much of his concentration as holding those spells did Harrier's. He didn't have enough attention to spare to wonder, and it would be deadly to Tiercel's concentration if he asked. But Harrier slowly realized that the Dragonbond meant that he didn't have to ask, and wouldn't have to ask questions like that ever again: Tiercel was forcing Ahairan back through the door that it had tricked Bisochim into opening. And Tiercel didn't care that the door was only meant to go one way, and he didn't care that the door was closed right now. He'd use as much force as he needed to—the magic of a Knight-Mage and a Wildmage combined—to push Ahairan through it.

When Ahairan realized Tiercel could actually do that, it began to beg and bargain. At first it did it just to cover its attempted escape. When Ahairan discovered the MageShield extended beneath the *regh* as well, it began to beg in earnest.

The battle was almost over then.

The air crackled with magic, with power, with heat. Harrier could feel what Tiercel was doing, and for a moment, he felt a flash of panic that something was going to happen not just to Ahairan, but to everything there was. The spells Tiercel was weaving together were complicated, and alien, and powerful . . .

And then it was over.

The shock of it—the spell's release, the sudden *absence* of Ahairan—made Harrier lose his grasp on the spells he was holding. Dropping the MageShield didn't matter—there was nothing alive—or moving—inside it now—but he lost control of the Healing Spell as well. He could *feel* Saravasse starting to become insubstantial beneath his hands.

No! Tiercel said.

Get out of my head! Harrier demanded.

Let me help. I can fix this, Tiercel insisted.

Fix it fast because I need to puke. Now that he wasn't forcing himself to concentrate, having been wallowing in Void for however long it'd been—a minute or a year—caught up to Harrier all at once. Tiercel pushed the Healing Spell back into place—it felt as if someone had shoved a package into Harrier's hands and told him to *deliver it*, damn it—and then there was a . . . something . . . that made his brain tickle. Harrier sneezed, and sneezed again, and gagged.

We'll need to come up with new words, Tiercel said. He sounded giddy with joy: Ancaladar's return, Ahairan's destruction. *But that will hold. Until we find Saravasse a Bondmate.*



“WHAT are you so happy about?” Harrier demanded crossly. Tiercel was too far away to hear him—still up at the edge of the *tehuko*—but Harrier had the awful feeling that Tiercel could hear him anyway. He sat back on Saravasse's neck. She snaked her head around so she could look him in the eye, and hissed. “Not you,” he said, closing his eyes again.

Do not fear, New Bonded. I will protect you from Saravasse, Ancaladar said. From Tiercel as well, if it becomes necessary. He sounded amused.

Harrier concentrated on breathing slowly and deeply, because apparently they'd just won, and he probably shouldn't celebrate by vomiting on anybody, including himself. He could still taste Ahairan in the back of his throat, even though he knew the thing was gone. Just thinking about it made his stomach revolt again. He swallowed hard. At least he'd get sympathy from Tiercel. And he was pretty sure that Tiercel ought to get a medal. Not for destroying Ahairan—okay, for that too—but for not going crazy because of having had to listen to Ahairan's mind for the last year and more.

“Harrier?” Shaiara said cautiously.

He opened his eyes again and looked at her. She might have said something else, but her words were drowned out by the roaring in his ears and the sound of cheering from the Isvaieni below.

Harrier climbed stiffly off of Saravasse’s neck. With one last hiss of displeasure, she flung herself off the staircase, and for a moment Harrier thought that she was leaping to her death. But she spread her wings with a loud snap and spiraled upward, catching the hot wind rising from the top of Telinchechitl and using it to carry her into the sky.

“We won,” he said.

Shaiara simply pointed down at the desert in confirmation as the cheers continued. Where Ahairan’s army had been collected there was a long pale oval of *regh*. It looked as if it had never been touched by either the *tehuko*’s ash or the black rain, and there was no sign at all of the Balwartas’ bodies or the lightning that had struck them.

Zanattar and his people were riding toward victims of Ahairan’s last spell. *It’s a good thing we brought so many extra shotors with us*, Harrier thought (although since they’d left them behind at the campsite, they were probably down there on the Dove Road now), and: *we don’t need to worry about that*, and: *Gens*.

Discovering whether his brother had survived would have to wait. Harrier didn’t know what he’d do if he found out Eugens hadn’t: he’d spend the rest of his life knowing that if only Eugens had come with him, he’d be alive, and by leaving him behind in Abi’Abadshar, Harrier had condemned him to death. . . .

He felt Ancaladar’s warm sympathy, and behind it—a fainter note, weary and uncertain—Tiercel’s horrified reaction to the thought that Eugens Gillain might be dead.

Harrier took a deep breath. *You don’t know. Until you do know, don’t think about it*. He took Shaiara’s hand. “If you think I’m walking up all those damned steps again today, you’re wrong, so you might as well come down,” he told Tiercel. “And do you think Ancaladar would mind stopping in Karahelanderialigor on his way here and asking them if they’ll send us some Elven Mages? We could really use some,” he added with a sigh.



THEY’D been roused out of their tents this morning at Watch Bells by a Demon and its army, and by four hours later—not even midmorning—Ahairan was dead and they’d won. Harrier had spent most of the last year thinking *Oh Light what now?* and he’d never dared to think: *What next?* It hardly seemed as if it could be the same day. In just a few hours, Harrier had gone from expecting to die, believing Tiercel would die, not knowing how many other people would have to die as well—to knowing they’d won decisively and completely and being Bonded to Ancaladar (and *Tiercel* as well). He still wasn’t sure how that was going to work out, but he didn’t have to know. The fate of the world no longer depended on whether or not Harrier could make things *work out*.

The next hours veered between joy and triumph, and frustration and worry. Against all expectation, everyone who’d been at Abi’Abadshar—including Eugens Gillain—had arrived at Telinchechitl alive, though far from well. When Harrier found him, Eugens had been bloody, filthy, starving, and parched, but alive. (He’d also—so Liapha said afterward—been carrying a child on his back, a baby in his arms, and a puppy stuffed into the front of his tunic for most of the way.)

Harrier wasn’t quite sure how he was going to explain to Eugens about Ancaladar, but maybe he wouldn’t have to.

Harrier might have been right about Ahairan not being able to locate the city by magic—they’d never know now—but it hadn’t needed to: there had been enough other ways for it to discover the city’s location, from pillaging Vianse Pallocons’s mind to being told by any of the Isvaieni it captured. And once it got there. . . . a Demon’s spells were more powerful than even a Dragonbond Wildmage’s. Liapha and Marap and Kamar and Helafin Perizel—everyone Harrier asked—all said the same thing: everyone in Abi’Abadshar had felt restless from the moment that the war-party had left. As the hours ticked by, first the young children could not be found, then the children who searched for them did not return, then the *ikulas* vanished, then the adults who searched for all of them (some of them at least) brought word that all the animals from the garden level—including all the shotors, which were stabled in some of the empty chambers there—had vanished.

Anyone who went out onto the surface of the desert began walking toward the Dove Road and south, unable to turn back.

Some of the inhabitants of Abi’Abadshar had been able to hold out against Ahairan’s call until midnight. They’d spent those hours frantically packing all the food and blankets, waterskins and medicines they could—they had no need of water with the constant rain. The *shotors* were gone, but they’d carried saddles with them, and had managed to catch up to the *shotors* by morning and saddle most of them, allowing the weakest to ride. While no one on that terrible journey could stop to rest for very long, Ahairan hadn’t forced them to the killing pace that had slaughtered most of the inhabitants of Akazidas’Iteru.

The first task Harrier’s war-band faced—now that Ahairan and all its creatures were *gone*—was to help the survivors of Abi’Abadshar. There wasn’t much they could do—they didn’t have enough tents for shelter and the campsite was hours away, there was nowhere near enough food; not enough available water now that the rain had stopped. . . .

Shaiara sent Zanattar and half his people to bring the campsite here, sent Tiercel and the rest of the war-band to locate their fresh *shotors* in the mass of animals and use them to herd the milling confused jumble of creatures—everything from goats and pigs to chickens, doves, and monkeys, as well as the *shotors* that had still been at Abi’Abadshar—off into some sort of organized holding area. Everyone had gone on for so long dismissing Tiercel as having only the most minor spells—most of the Isvaieni weren’t even aware that Tiercel was responsible for most of the globes of light that had illuminated their campsites each night—that they were stunned to see him deal with the problem of keeping the animals from straying by casually causing the surface of the Barahileth to rise up in a series of stone circles—and then casting MageShield over the doorway he left in each. When Tiercel finally realized that water was a pressing problem for everyone—water *right here*—he provided some. Not the way Bisochim had (or Harrier might have), by calling natural water to the desert’s surface: Tiercel simply turned the desert to water, making a cylinder of water going down into the earth until it struck the water that was already there.

Harrier only knew about it secondhand, when Ancaladar told him what Tiercel had done. When he did, Harrier realized that the feelings of triumph in the back of his mind must belong to Tiercel. Harrier winced, just a little, knowing that too many of the Isvaieni had called Tiercel “the Northern Mage without magic,” and Tiercel had known it. Now that he could, of course Tiercel was taking the opportunity to show off.

And most people wouldn’t blame him, but Harrier did. Not *blame*, exactly, but Harrier thought it was a bad thing. There were few enough checks on the High Magick as it was.

There is you, Bonded, Ancaladar said. And me.

“Right,” Harrier muttered out loud (it helped to do that when he was talking to Ancaladar, even though Ancaladar was still about a billion miles away). “Because saying ‘no’ worked out *so* well for Saravasse.”

He felt Ancaladar’s snort of amusement in his mind. *Am I not Ancaladar Star-Crowned, Bonded? But you will stop him, if I do not.*

“Yeah, right. Come on. We have work to do.”

While everything else had been going on, the survivors had organized themselves, just as they had after every battle. There was no panic and little confusion; nearly everyone here was a veteran of a long and bitter campaign. *Ummarai* took stock of their people, determined who was most gravely injured, who could wait for Healing, what must be done at once, what might wait, what would be good to have if only the world were the world they wished it to be.

Before he began to deal with the injured, Harrier conjured enormous blocks of ice into being on the floor of the Barahileth. It was something he’d never thought he’d

be able to do, but he'd seen Bisochim do it, and Ancaladar had trained Jermayan and trained Tiercel, Ancaladar could give *him* a few pointers. It was surprisingly easy: the *regh* was still sodden from the sennights of unrelenting rain, so there was a lot of water available. The ice-blocks would melt quickly, but they'd provide shade for a few hours, and a little coolness in the furnace heat of the Barahileth.

Once that was done, he began Healing people.

It was a disorienting sensation to Heal without counting the cost or hearing the tiny implacable voice of the Wild Magic seeking his acceptance of MagePrice. It didn't matter that he would never again need to worry about being able to pay spell-cost, or need to seek out people willing to share spell-price, or that his Bonded's power was his without asking. Harrier asked. Permission of those he Healed. Permission of Ancaladar to draw upon the freely-given gift. It would be too easy to think that this was something he had a right to otherwise. He'd lied to Tiercel, once upon a time, telling him that the Wild Magic had asked him to renounce his Books when Ahairan was destroyed. He'd come too close, today, to having his Books renounce *him*.

Ancaladar warned him—and Harrier assumed (correctly) that he warned Tiercel as well—that when he passed through Pelashia's Veil, they might sense a disruption in the Bond. Harrier found that having the Veil between him and Ancaladar was like having the roaring of surf constantly in his ears, and he couldn't hear Ancaladar's voice any longer. He was surprised at how much of a wrench it was to lose a Bond that had only been in place for a few hours, and he told himself he didn't care, because it didn't affect his ability to draw on Ancaladar's power, and that was the important thing right now.

Harrier worked his way through the serious injuries: infected blisters and open sores and burns, because even rainclouds were no protection from the brutal desert sun. There were a thousand interruptions—people wanting to know what they'd do now, what they should do next—and Harrier didn't have any answers. He was so busy that he barely registered hearing Ancaladar's voice again. Ancaladar told him that he'd been to Githilnamanaranath and spoken to Vairindiel Elvenqueen, and that Vairindiel Elvenqueen said that she would send help immediately. Harrier was pretty sure he had a good idea of the Elves' "immediately" by now. He dismissed Ancaladar's comment and went on working.



THE tents were up. The babies and the youngest children were under shelter. It was as much as they could do: Harrier had asked, and even the High Magick couldn't turn *regh* into fuel. They could do a little cooking. After that, what they butchered would have to be eaten raw.

There was so much to do, and he wasn't even half finished doing it, but Harrier was walking away from their makeshift Healing tent (no tent at all, just carpets out in the open) to renew the ice-blocks, because they'd melted, and he needed to put up more. They weren't much in the way of shelter, but they were something. He glanced at the stone corrals, and wondered if Tiercel could make whole buildings. Light knew they didn't want to stay here, but they couldn't leave at this exact moment, either.

He was feeling just a little grumpy, because when you'd won you ought to get to celebrate, not be handed a whole new manifest of problems, when he saw an enormous shadow flicker across the *regh*. He looked up and saw Ancaladar spiraling down through the sky, and saw Tiercel running across the desert to meet him.

"Don't you know better than to run during the day in the desert *yet*, Tyr?" Harrier muttered under his breath, and walked sedately out to join them.



AFTER spending so many moonturns complaining about how the Elves never did anything soon enough, both Harrier and Tiercel were amazed at how fast they could act when they wanted to. Against all of Harrier's expectations, Vairindiel Elvenqueen had actually meant "immediately" when she said "immediately." Less than an hour after Ancaladar arrived, the sky over Telinchechitl was filled with dragons from the Elven Lands. Harrier was happy to let the Elves take charge of the enormous task of feeding and sheltering and Healing thousands of people. Now dragons in every possible color basked on the stone at the foot of Telinchechitl and along the steps leading to the top, and the desert was filled with enormous flower-bright Elven pavilions—enough to hold all the refugees and half the livestock, too. Harrier found it wildly disconcerting that tents made of fabric so thin that he could see shadows through them managed to be morning-cool on the inside while it was still the same old Barahileth on the outside. Shaiara didn't like them at all, and Harrier found himself pressed into service once more, reassuring the skittish Isvaieni that the arrival of the Elder Kin wasn't a just a prelude to some new disaster. Harrier barely found time to eat the food Shaiara shoved into his hands in passing—the members of the warband were the only ones whole and healthy enough to deal with the many tasks that the Elven Mages simply couldn't: Elves had lived apart from Men for so many centuries that they understood the Isvaieni as poorly as the Isvaieni understood them, and after fighting Ahairan for so long, the desertfolk were not so much mistrustful as wildly paranoid—and it hardly registered on Harrier that for the first time in nearly a year he was eating fresh-baked bread, and cheese, and savory spiced meat.

It was late in the afternoon before the immediate needs of Ahairan's last victims were dealt with—every last person and animal fed, and Healed, and sheltered—and Harrier was looking for some place to simply lie down and *rest* when Ancaladar told him that he and Tiercel had been summoned to an audience with Vairindiel Elvenqueen.



HARRIER felt as if he ought to wipe his boots before he stepped onto the carpet inside the royal pavilion, only there wasn't any place to wipe them, and the only thing on his boots was dust, anyway. He shivered when he walked inside and once again the temperature dropped sharply. Maybe Shaiara had a point.

He really didn't want to be here.

Tiercel had apparently found time not only to take a bath and shave sometime in the last several hours, but to get some new clothes. They were all in shades of cream and sand and gold: tunic and leggings and boots and long sleeveless vest and glittering complicated sash. Seeing Tiercel in the Elven outfit looked odd after so many moonturns of seeing him wearing the same filthy tattered desert robes Harrier was wearing, and it only reminded Harrier sharply of how he must look. His once-blue Wildmage robes were faded and ragged, grimy with dirt and ash and black rain and blood. He had most of a year's growth of beard on his face and the last thing he'd had that had even halfway resembled a bath had been ice cold and without soap, rinsing salt and ash from his skin in water from Abi'Abadshar's *iteru*.

The desert sun shining through the green silk made the inside of the tent look like the inside of a forest. The tent was filled with furniture—tables and chairs and carpets and lanterns. Harrier still wasn't sure where all of that had come from, because when the dragons had landed, they'd all been wearing carrying baskets, but all of this stuff just wouldn't *fit* . . .

Tiercel nudged him with his foot in a "pay attention" way. He could tell Tiercel was amused and exasperated, but he couldn't tell *exactly* what he was thinking—not in actual words—and Harrier was very grateful. At least the part of the Bond where they were *living inside each others' heads* seemed to be going away. Being Bonded to Ancaladar was wonderful. Being Bonded to Tiercel Isallen Rolfort was . . . well, once upon a time Harrier would have said it was his worst nightmare, except now he knew it didn't even come close. He'd still rather not be, though.

At the far end of the tent, Vairindiel Elvenqueen was sitting on an ordinary chair just like all the other chairs Harrier had seen around the camp. Except for the narrow circlet of silvery metal around her head, and the ring with the green stone on her hand, she was dressed just like all the other Elves here—pretty much like Tiercel, in fact

—but there was no doubt of who she was. Tiercel walked forward, and Harrier walked forward because Tiercel did. They stopped a few paces away from the front of her chair.

“All the Peoples of the Light owe you—both of you—more than any of us can ever repay,” Vairindiel Elvenqueen said. “But it is the Elves who shall discharge the debt. And so to you I say this: ask what you will of us, to the end of your lives, and your children’s lives, and your children’s children’s, and it shall be granted, to the last measure of our ability. I so pledge the word and the honor of the House of Caerthalien in witness of my oath.”

Tiercel just blinked, slowly, several times. Harrier didn’t think this was the time to mention that they were probably going to be calling in that pledge before morning. The Isvai was the Isvaieni’s home, but right now there wasn’t one plant, one oasis, one animal anywhere in it—unless there was something left at Saphthruk. The tribes had never been completely self-sufficient, either—some of them had traded with the *Iteru*-cities, and those that hadn’t had traded with those that had. Even the Nazindar wore cloth woven on city-loom. Now the *Iteru*-cities were gone, and with them, the trade in spices and medicines and textiles and rugs that had flowed north. It would take more magic than that possessed by two half-trained Mages, Dragonbond or not, to remake an entire desert.

“And you, Harrier Gillain, once of Armethalieh, your gift to us was the greatest of all. Tiercel has told us of how you accepted the Three Books from Shalkan’s daughter so that you could aid him on his journey, at great cost to yourself.”

Harrier was so busy trying to reconcile “Shalkan’s daughter” with “Kareta” and wondering if Vairindiel Elvenqueen meant *the* Shalkan, and thinking (in a horrified way) that she probably did, that he nearly missed the moment that Vairindiel Elvenqueen held out her hands to him. He started to recoil, started to stumble through an explanation of how he hadn’t done anything, and if he had, he hadn’t done it for the Elves, or for a bunch of Peoples of the Light that he’d never even met, when he felt a sharp kick to his ankle.

He glanced sideways suspiciously. Tiercel looked completely innocent. He’d learned exactly how much that innocent act was really worth. So he shrugged just a little and took the last few steps forward that he needed to take to clasp the hands of the Queen of the Elves. They were slender and smooth and pale and jeweled, and Harrier thought of Shaiara’s hands, blunt and brown and strong and calloused, and he knew which he preferred.

“Tiercel has told me that it is now The Time of the Three Becoming One. Tannetarie the White’s prophecy has been fulfilled, and you have done this through your acceptance of the Bond with Ancaladar,” she said.

Before Harrier could stop her, she raised his hands—scarred and actually *dirty*—to her lips and kissed them. He barely managed to keep from yelping in alarm or yanking them free.

“Know that my joy—and the joy of all Elvenkind—is beyond measure, beyond words,” she said, finally letting go of him. “Know that—for this reason above all—the claim of the House of Gillain upon the House of Caerthalien shall endure as long as Leaf and Star.”

Harrier was suddenly far colder than the helpful Elven Magery could account for. He hadn’t learned a lot about the Elves during his brief visit to Karahelanderialigor, but he’d learned enough to know that this was their most binding oath. As long as Vairindiel Elvenqueen had descendants—or her brothers and sisters or *anyone related to her* had descendants—and he (or Gens or Brell or Carault and probably even all of his cousins, both the Gillain ones and the Auvalen ones) had descendants, his descendants could ask hers for things, and they’d have to give them to them. That was what “House of” meant. That was what “as long as Leaf and Star endures” meant.

“You have honored me far beyond what I deserve,” he said with utter sincerity. “I will live the rest of my life striving to be worthy of it.”

“You are worthy already,” Vairindiel Elvenqueen assured him. “But I will not keep you now. Your labors have been long. Now is a time for rejoicing.”



“THAT’S the tactful way of saying ‘you smell like a goat,’ ” Tiercel said, as the two of them walked out of the royal pavilion a few moments later.

“Yeah, well, I don’t exactly see any bath houses around here,” Harrier grumbled.

Tiercel pointed across the desert to a pavilion of bright yellow silk. A year ago he might have smirked in triumph. Now he just sighed faintly.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Harrier said in disbelief.

“Har, we lived in Karahelanderialigor for an entire moonturn and spent at least one more stopping at farms and villages on our way out of the Elven Lands. Can you imagine the Elves going anywhere and *not* bringing a bathhouse?”

“Maybe not,” Harrier said grudgingly. Tiercel had to have taken a bath *somewhere*, after all. “You might have warned me she was going to kiss me. I’d also like to point out that it’s the middle of the day and you aren’t wearing a *chadar*.”

“Oh. Right.” Tiercel snapped his fingers. The air above their heads shimmered and darkened, and suddenly they were both standing in shadow.

Harrier just shook his head, halfway between amused and uneasy. (In the moment he framed the question, Harrier already knew the answer: Tiercel hadn’t sheltered all the Isvaieni from the sun this way because he could only cast Shield directly over himself. He might have been able to make it large enough to cover six thousand people, but he wouldn’t have been able to do anything else. And they would have panicked. And Harrier didn’t think he’d get used to knowing Tiercel’s motives, and Tiercel’s understanding of how the High Magick worked, for a very, *very* long time.) “Show-off,” he said.

“It’s nice to be able to,” Tiercel answered a little forlornly. “And—what did you expect her to do? *Think*, Har. Who came here from Githilnamanaranath?”

“Elves,” Harrier said promptly.

“On?” Tiercel prompted.

“Dragons,” Harrier answered.

“Which?” Tiercel asked patiently.

“Oh. *Oh*,” Harrier said as the realization sank in.

“Right. Elven Mages who flew here on *dragons*, idiot. Queen Vairindiel’s dragon is Ostelare, and she’s really happy right now that Ostelare the Golden isn’t going to have to die when she does.”

“Which would be in about five hundred years or so anyway,” Harrier muttered rebelliously. “Prophecies suck,” he added.

Tiercel sighed in exasperation. “Do you know how old Ancaladar is?”

“Nooooo . . .” Harrier drawled.

“Neither do I. But since he saw the Great War and the Flowering War both, he’s *at least* two thousand years old. And he’s probably older. Dragons don’t die, Har. Not unless their Bondmates do.”

“Two Bondmates—and the ability to add a new one whenever you need to—means they don’t ever have to die,” Harrier said. “So when I kill you—which will probably be soon—Ancaladar and I can just go find somebody else.”

“More or less,” Tiercel said. “I might be able to talk Shaiara into dropping you down a well instead, though.”

“I don’t believe we’re still alive,” Harrier said slowly, shaking his head. He knew it would be days—sennights—even moonturns—before it really sank in, and far longer than that before he stopped startling awake at every sound in the night. All these moonturns, he’d planned for every possibility except being alive after Ahairan

was gone. He didn't object to being alive, but it would take some getting used to.

"I can't believe you're going to take your first bath in half a year," Tiercel said. His tone was light, but his eyes were shadowed. He looked up to the sky, and Harrier followed his gaze.

Far above, Saravasse was circling Telinchechitl, mourning her lost beloved.



LEAVING Harrier to his own devices (there wasn't much trouble you could get into in a bath house), Tiercel walked back toward the tents. Ancaladar's presence was a comforting weight against his mind, and somewhere beneath that, like a constant irritating grumble of thunder, was Harrier. He wondered how he sounded to Harrier. Just as irritating?

That will pass with time, Ancaladar said.

"Oh, Light, I hope so," Tiercel said. "But how do you *know*?"

Not all Bondings are comfortable at first, even when they are irresistible, Ancaladar replied.

"Good to know," Tiercel muttered. It was just a little, well, *daunting* to think about living for years and decades and becoming as old as Liapha and someday having to accept a Wildmage who wasn't Harrier into the Dragonbond, because Harrier would be dead. Of course, maybe it would be Harrier who would have to find a new High Mage. Tiercel felt deep sympathy for that High Mage, whoever he or she was.

That day is far, far away, Bonded, Ancaladar said fondly.

Of course—Tiercel thought unwarily—Ancaladar might die first. Dragons were immortal but not invulnerable.

Should that happen, Bonded, both of you will die at once, Ancaladar said sadly.

"We'll skip that, then," Tiercel said hastily.

He was heading for the Nazindar tent mostly by habit. Though most of the Isvaieni were housed now in Elven pavilions, the war-band had traveled with ten tents—having selected both the smallest and therefore lightest of the surviving tents back in Abi'Abadshar, and bringing more than they actually needed, both to have spares in case of trouble and to provide dry storage space in the rain—and now that the tents weren't needed as emergency shelter, the Nazindar had claimed one of them.

When he stepped beneath the awning and into the gloom of the tent itself, he saw Kamar, Shaiara, Marap, Raffa, Natha, Narkil, and—surprisingly—Liapha sitting around a *kaffeyah* service. There were only six adult Nazindar and eight children ranging in age from three to nine years—all orphans—left. Tiercel remembered that once—a long time ago—Shaiara had told him that no Nazindar child could be an orphan so long as the tribe endured: well, it had come very close to *not* enduring this year.

He found himself looking for Bisochim, still expecting to see him, still surprised when he didn't. It didn't seem right that he was dead. It didn't seem real, either—Tiercel had still been so stunned by Ancaladar's reappearance, so focused on keeping Harrier from jumping into the Lake of Fire, that he'd nearly missed the moment when Bisochim had surrendered his life. And for what? The Firecrown had never appeared. It had never done anything at all. Bisochim could still be here, alive, able to seek out the peace and healing and absolution he deserved.

"Come! Join us! There is *food*!" Liapha said cheerfully. "Though—alas—no *rekhattan*."

"Meddlesome old woman—this is not your tent or your carpet," Shaiara snapped. "Nor does Tiercel High Mage of the Cold North require your invitation or mine to enter."

"That may be, daughter's daughter, but live as long as I, and we shall see who meddles and who does not," Liapha said, undaunted. "But the great *Ummara* Shaiara bids you welcome to a tent you need no welcome to, Great Mage! We have need of your wisdom"

"Better we had fed you to the Demon moonturns ago, Kadyastar, and won our victory easily," Shaiara growled, and Kamar chuckled.

Tiercel shook his head, but sat down in the circle of Isvaieni anyway. He accepted the traditional cup of *kaffeyah*—he wasn't sure where all this stuff was coming from, but he was glad it was here—and took a cautious sip. He still didn't think he'd ever like *kaffeyah*, but this had been so heavily sweetened—and spiced—that it hardly tasted like *kaffeyah* at all.

In addition to the *kaffeyah* service, there was a basket of stuffed glazed apricots and dates, and another one of the round white cakes that Tiercel knew were made of ground almonds and egg whites and honey. Last, there was a platter of plain dried figs and fresh flatbread. It wasn't that Tiercel was hungry, exactly, but all of these things were luxuries that he'd lived without for a long time, and he'd always had a sweet tooth. When he'd lived in Tarnatha'Iteru, he'd found the almond-paste cakes almost too sweet—now he finished three and only stopped then because he didn't want to look like a glutton.

"Queen Vairindiel wants to send people—Mages—to examine Abi'Abadshar. She's asked *Ummara* Shaiara if she'll give permission. *Ummara* Shaiara . . . seeks counsel before giving her answer."

Tiercel hadn't realized that Kave was in the tent until he spoke. He was surprised to see Kave there instead of with Magistrate Perizel in one of the Elven pavilions. He was even more surprised to see that though Kave had obviously bathed and shaved, he was still wearing desert robes. Their color was the same sober gray-dun of the tent fabric, making him almost disappear in the dimness.

Tiercel turned to address his answer to Shaiara. "I'm sorry, Shaiara. I don't understand."

Shaiara frowned in distress. "The High *Ummara* of the Elder Kin speaks as if I should own a place, as if it were a *shotor* or a falcon or a tent, to say 'you may come' and 'you may go.' How shall I say to such a one that this is not so? I cannot say she may go. I cannot say she may not."

"Oh," Tiercel said. Certainly Shaiara could have said as much to Queen Vairindiel in so many words. And Shaiara obviously dreaded giving offense to the Queen of the Elves by telling her she was an idiot. "Why don't you tell Harrier about this and have him bring your answer to her? Harrier can tell her that since Great Queen Viellessar Farcarinon built Abi'Abadshar in the first place, the Elves don't need to ask permission to go there."

"And Harrier of the Two Swords will wrap up his speaking in such soft words that the High *Ummara* of the Elder Kin will surely be charmed," Liapha drawled.

Tiercel laughed despite himself. "He's terrified of her." He glanced again at Kave, curiously.

"I'm hiding," Kave said frankly. "I was hoping to find either you or Harrier without leaving this tent, because . . . I wanted to ask a favor."

Tiercel opened his mouth to speak.

"A wise man would find out what it is first," Kamar told him reprovingly, and Kave smiled.

"Your friend is a wise man," he said. "Magistrate Perizel and Master Gillain want to go back to Armethalieh as soon as they can, and from what you told me about Darkspawn showing up for moonturns before Ahairan got loose—well, even now that she's gone, some of them might still be out there, so Magistrate Perizel needs to report to the Chief Magistrate immediately so that the Nine Cities can take precautions. And . . . you know, from the moment we saw those Shamblers beneath the walls of Akazidas'Iteru, I've been wishing with all my heart that I was back in Armethalieh every bell of every day. And now I can be home by Evensong Bells. And I don't want to go. I want to stay here."

"In the Barahileth?" Tiercel asked blankly.

Kave shook his head in amusement. "In the Isvai would be better, I think. After everything I've seen and done, going back to the City to be a Magistrate's Clerk is going to be very dull. And it's never been what I really wanted. You're going to have a lot to do to rebuild here, and it all can't be done by waving your hands and wishing. You need to replant most of the desert, just to begin with. What are you going to re-plant it *with*?"

"Uh . . ." Tiercel hadn't thought that far. This morning he'd been planning to jump into the Lake of Fire.

"You can't make buried roots grow this time. The rain's rotted all of them. You need to bring in new plants. But if they aren't the right ones, they'll die. Or poison the desert. So you start by finding out what *was* here—I can help you do that—and bringing it here. You'll have to start small, of course, but—"

"Wait—Wait—Wait—I believe you," Tiercel said hastily. He looked at Shaiara. "I think he's right about the plants. If the whole Madiran isn't going to just be a wasteland where nobody can live, we need to figure out how to fix it."

"Is this then the favor you wish to ask?" Shaiara asked, looking at Kave. "To live among us, as one of us, until the end of your days?"

"I want to find out how the world is put together," Kave answered. "Putting a piece of it back together seems like a good place to start."

"Northerners!" Liapha said. "Never one word when twenty will do! When the Nalzindar she-*pahk* casts you from her tents, boy, come to me. If you can do nothing else, you can amuse me."

"Huh," Shaiara said. "See to it that he does not make all the foolish errors *you* made in the beginning," she said, regarding Tiercel severely. "For I will have more time to occupy my time than keeping one northerner from leaving his bones upon the sand."

"She means that you can stay," Tiercel said to Kave.

Kave smiled with relief and pleasure. "I suppose I'd better go tell Magistrate Perizel my decision. And write a letter for her to take to my father."

"I'll go with you," Tiercel said. "It just occurred to me that if somebody doesn't find something clean for Harrier to wear, he may never come out of that bathhouse."



THE bath house was just like the one Harrier had been in at Blackrowan Farm—and, for that matter, like every Elven bathhouse he'd encountered on his travels, though this one was somehow portable, and in addition to the usual bathtub, bench, towels, and soap, it held a mirror and a table with scissors, razors, combs, and a variety of creams and lotions. Harrier took the opportunity to regard himself in the mirror and blinked in disbelief. His skin was so sun-bronzed that his eyes looked green instead of their normal hazel, and there were deep lines around his eyes. He'd known he had a beard, but he'd never seen it. The face in the mirror was a stranger's.

He picked up one of the razors and hesitated, then put it down again unused and turned to the bath. There was a small tub to stand in to catch the water while you scrubbed yourself clean, and a ladle to dip water out of the larger bath. It took a while before Harrier felt clean enough to get into the bath, and the thought of putting his old clothes back on again afterward made him shudder, but fortunately he didn't have to. While he was trying to decide if it would be too much of a breach of etiquette if he just washed them in the soaking tub—he would have lazed there longer, except for the fact that it just seemed too weird to soak in a tub of warm water in the middle of the Barahileth—Tiercel came back into the pavilion carrying a large bundle in a familiar shade of blue.

"Ugh," Tiercel said, regarding Harrier's cast-off garments. "I don't know why they're still here. You'd think they could walk off by themselves."

It was something that Tiercel might have said a year ago—or two—but now it seemed forced: an effort. An act. Harrier could tell how very hard Tiercel was working to project the illusion that nothing had changed—that *he* hadn't changed—and the sad and crazy thing was, he was trying to do it with the one person in the world it would never work on again.

"Blue?" Harrier asked, nodding at the pile.

"Mondalinwael said to bring you this to wear," Tiercel said, shrugging. "And Gens is looking for you, so if you don't want him looking in *here* . . ."

"Fine. Right. Go away," Harrier said hastily.



HARRIER barely needed the towels to dry himself, since the desert air sucked the moisture from his skin and hair almost at once. When he walked over to the bench to see what Tiercel had left for him, he discovered that it was a copy of his desert robes. The fabric was finer, and this set was tailored to fit him (as much as Isvaieni garments were tailored at all), and the new boots that were included with it were blue as well. He'd managed to forget just how *blue* a Wildmage's robes were.

He dressed, shook out the rags he'd been wearing, tucked his Three Books into the sash of his new robes, tucked his *geschak* through the sash, buckled his Selken blades over his back, and went off to find out what Gens wanted.



WHEN he came out, he saw that two of the dragons—a red one that wasn't Saravasse, and another one that was sort of an in-between color that he couldn't quite decide whether it was gray or lilac—were standing out on the desert, saddled. He walked toward them.

"Har! What are you doing dressed like that? Da's going to have cat fits! And you haven't shaved, either. Well, come on. We have to go. The Elves say they'll take us back to the City now."

Harrier turned at the sound of the voice, but it took him a moment to recognize his brother. Like Tiercel, Eugens had bathed and shaved and dressed in the Elven style, only Eugens was wearing shades of green and tan and russet red. No *chadar* (of course), and Harrier realized, with a pang of sorrow, that he could see bright threads of silver in Eugens's hair that hadn't been there a year ago.

For just an instant, Harrier was tempted. Home and Armethalieh and the house on Grindon Road, and *oh*, he could be home by suppertime, and Ma would cry over him, and Da would thump his back and clear his throat gruffly . . .

And then he looked around, his eye passing over the bright pavilions of the Elves until they settled on the homely dun-colored tents of the Isvaieni. Armethalieh wasn't home anymore. It wouldn't have been if he weren't Dragonbond. It wouldn't have been if he weren't a Wildmage. He'd come too far to go back to what he'd been. Even if it were possible, it wasn't what he wanted.

"I'm not going back, Gens," Harrier said. "I told you that, remember?"

Eugens made a face, shaking his head. "Look, Har. I won't tell Ma you're a Wildmage. Just come home. Bring Shaiara, too. Just for a visit."

Harrier shook his head and held out a hand to Eugens, and then turned to walk toward the waiting dragons. He knew that Eugens thought that if he could get him to come home for just a sennight or two, sennights would stretch to moonturns and he'd never come back to the Isvai at all. "I have work to do here," he said, as they walked toward the waiting dragons.

"Here?" Eugens said blankly. "It's a *desert*."

"Yes," Harrier said. "And it always will be, Light be praised. But it needs to be a better desert than it is now."

“Well . . . how are you going to manage that, Har?” Eugens asked.

“We’ll think of something,” Harrier answered. “Shaiara and I will think of something.” *And Tiercel. And Ancaladar. And the Wild Magic. But you don’t need to know any of that, Gens, because I don’t think you’d understand it at all.*

They walked on until they reached the dragons.

“I hope they intend to feed us in Armethalieh,” the pale dragon said, sighing gustily.

“Do you ever think of something other than your belly, Atuona?” the scarlet one demanded.

“Yes, Falrohntar. My shocking beauty,” Atuona replied. “Ah, here comes the little human lawgiver now. I hope she enjoyed her interview with Vairindiel Elvenqueen.”

“You are a terrible gossip, my Bonded,” the Elf standing beside Atuona said reprovingly. She bowed slightly, in acknowledgment of Harrier’s arrival, and Harrier returned the greeting meticulously.

“How is that gossip, Nerindanamar?” Atuona asked, sounding hurt. “I merely observe what anyone might and extend my good wishes. I am ever misjudged.”

Falrohntar snorted loudly and said nothing. Falrohntar’s Bonded said something too quietly for Harrier to make out.

Since both dragons were ignoring him, and Falrohntar’s Bonded was far enough away that politeness didn’t require Harrier to notice him, Harrier was free to turn and look back the way he’d come. Magistrate Perizel was just walking out of Vairindiel Elvenqueen’s green pavilion. Like Eugens, she was dressed in the Elven fashion. Harrier didn’t know what the two of them had said to each other, but he suspected that the report Magistrate Perizel made to Chief Magistrate Vaunnel would say exactly what he hoped it would. The whole truth, as tangled and complicated and unbelievable as it was.

“Wait,” he said. *Two dragons. Two passengers.* “Where’s Kave Breulin?”

Kave has decided to stay here, Harrier, Ancaladar said.

“Oh,” Harrier said aloud. Eugens looked at him oddly. “I . . . just remembered,” Harrier said hastily. “He isn’t going back either.”

There was a moment’s awkward pause. “Look. You aren’t just going to vanish again, are you?” Eugens asked, and now he sounded truly frightened. He reached out to grip Harrier’s arm. “Maybe I should stay for a few days. Really. I—”

“Gens, I promise you. I won’t vanish. I’ll be here. And once *Magistrate* Perizel gets to Armethalieh, the news about what’s happened here will be all over the City immediately. If you ever want to be let into your house again—or Ma’s—you’d better be first to Grindon Road with the news that you’ve survived. And that I have. But . . . I’ll write. And someday—not soon, but someday—I’ll visit.”

“You’d better mean that,” Eugens said, pulling him into a fierce hug. “All of that. Or I’m coming back here—and you’ll find out that Knight-Mage or no, you’re not too grand for me to beat your head down between your elbows.”

“If Breil doesn’t get to you first, you mean,” Harrier said. “He’ll make a better Apprentice Harbormaster than I ever would have. All goes as the Wild Magic wills.”

He almost winced to hear himself say those words; twice over because he’d said them with perfect seriousness. He wasn’t really sure who he was anymore, and the sooner Eugens left, the sooner he could start figuring that out. He’d never get used to his new life with his old one pulling at him.

But a few moments later, Magistrate Perizel had joined them. The Elves made mounting into their dragons’ saddles look graceful, but it took both Harrier and Eugens to get Magistrate Perizel onto Falrohntar’s saddle and then Harrier made a stirrup to boost Eugens up into Atuona’s. Fortunately these were proper Elven saddles, with straps, so there was no possibility any of the dragons’ riders could fall from their backs.

First Atuona ran along the desert, snapping his (or her) wings wide with a whipcrack sound and leaping into the sky. Harrier heard Eugens’s whoop of exhilaration as the dragon began its slow climb into the sky, though when Falrohntar followed, Magistrate Perizel maintained a silence born of either dignity or terror.



AS the hours passed, and awareness of victory became conviction that they had not only won, but would live to see not merely tomorrow, but all the tomorrows that Sand and Star saw fit to grant them, the Isvaieni’s stunned acceptance turned to joy and then to quiet celebration. In the cool of the evening, all of the Isvaieni tents had been opened out as far as possible to become the heart of the gathering, for the Isvaieni might revere the Elder Brethren, but they were also daunted by them. For their part, the Elves had supplied the Isvaieni with truly staggering amounts of food and drink—not charity, for as Harrier had explained, the Isvaieni and the Elves had been battle-comrades in this war, and as such shared one tent—then tactfully withdrew.

It was understood that tomorrow would bring many things. The beginning of plans and understandings of how it was they must live now. The northerner-who-had-come-to-live-in-the-tents-of-the-Nalzindar spoke many wise and hopeful words about restoring the Isvai to what it once had been, and spoke them in a way that any man or woman might grasp, for nearly all upon whose ears his words fell had herded, or hunted, or gathered the desert’s bounty into their two hands, or even planted and harvested. And so all knew that when Kave Northerner spoke of bringing plants to the Isvai and leaving them to flourish, he spoke not of a work to be completed in one wheel of the seasons, or two, but ten or twenty, or even more. If the Isvaieni must live as exiles until that work was done, it would be in the knowledge that their true home would someday be restored to them. For tonight there would be joy.



THIS is my home, Shaiara thought. She stood at the edge of the camp, gazing out into the darkness as the festival celebration went on noisily behind her. I do not wish to leave it. The Nalzindar were people of the desert’s clean vast silence. How could they be truly Nalzindar if the desert were taken from them? This is a question whose answer I do not know, she thought sadly. It was in her heart that it was a question whose answer she had thought she would never need to know, for since the two northerners had first entered her life, she had expected daily to lay her bones upon the sand—not to survive to see a future not only unlooked-for, but unimaginable.

“Brother’s daughter, I would have speech with you,” Kamar said quietly, coming up behind her.

“How should there come a time when I would not hear your words?” Shaiara answered, turning to face him.

“My *Ummara* will always hear her *chaharum*’s words,” Kamar answered. “I can but hope my brother’s daughter will hear mine, for Darak was dear to me, and his daughter is dear also.”

“What words does Darak’s brother have for Darak’s daughter?” Shaiara answered.

“Only these: that he would not have Darak’s daughter forget that the Blue Robes belong to all tribes and none, even if this is a truth that a northern Blue Robe does not heed. Darak’s brother would ask that Darak’s daughter not strive to make such a one Nalzindar, for it cannot be so. He may live as Isvaieni, and walk as one born upon the carpet, but if this is so, then you must remind him of what he has forgotten. Once Nalzindar, perhaps. But no longer.”

“How is it that you shall seek to tell me that I must counsel a Blue Robe?” Shaiara whispered harshly.

“For love of Sand and Star, and of you,” Kamar answered steadily. “Grant him the freedom of your tent, if you wish, for a season or even a turn of the seasons—it would be no bad thing. All have seen that the power that Bisochim once claimed is now Harrier’s to call, without Taint or Shadow. But when that time is run, you must

both remember that Harrier of the Two Swords is Blue Robe, and not Nalzindar. Shaiara”—he said, placing his hands gently upon her shoulders—“long have I waited to see the one upon whom your eye and heart would light and say: *this is the one with whom I shall end my days*. I grieve with you, Darak’s daughter, that it should be a Blue Robe.”

Shaiara stepped back, and Kamar’s hands fell away. *But this is a new time—for new ways!* She wanted to fling those words in Kamar’s face, except that in her own ears they sounded far too much like the false words of Bisochim, from the days when his heart had been held in the hand of a Demon. She had never meant to love Harrier of the Two Swords, or to give him that place in her heart and spirit that she had thought would forever remain untouched. He was of the Cold North, still in so many ways a stranger.

A thought as chilling as any ice conjured out of air suddenly filled her throat. Perhaps—with Ahairan slain—Harrier meant matters to be different between them? A promise given for a moonturn was a different thing than a vow given for a lifetime—and in the gardens of Abi’Abadshar he had sworn to her while believing himself doomed to die.

“Your counsel is wise, father’s brother. I shall think upon your words and seek their wisdom.” Without waiting to hear if Kamar would say more, Shaiara turned and strode away into the dark.



ABOUT half an hour after it started, Harrier remembered that he’d always hated parties. The food was good. The drink was good—he stayed away from the beer and the date wine, but there were about a dozen different kinds of fruit juice.

The people sucked.

Not the people *exactly*. He’d spent most of the last year trying to keep the Isvaieni alive, and he knew just about all of them personally by now. It was just what they were saying and doing. A lot of them wanted to congratulate him on defeating Ahairan, which just made him *think* about Ahairan, and realize that he couldn’t actually explain what had happened. A lot of them wanted to *kiss* him—Liapha had managed it, to raucous cheers—and that was just embarrassing. Most of the people who didn’t want to either kiss him or congratulate him wanted to know what they should do next.

Having spoken to Kave about his plans for the Isvai, Harrier actually had a pretty good idea now, but tonight wasn’t the time to tell anybody, since the idea even creeps *him* out. He thought they should pick the least-ruined of the far-southern *Iteru*-cities (which left Akazidas’Iteru out, though if there were any desert plants still alive there, they should grab them while they could for transplanting) and repair it, and live there. Even Orinaisal’Iteru was big enough to hold all the Isvaieni who were left, and it would give them some place to be while they were bringing the entire desert back to life.

They’d need to farm as well as have flocks, and he didn’t think any of the tribes had many farming skills, but the Elves certainly farmed, and they could help.

Avoiding that conversation was unpleasantly awkward. And the more times he had—or didn’t have—it, the more Harrier realized that apparently the Isvaieni had managed to get the idea that he’d always had a Master Plan for defeating Ahairan, and despite the fact that this so-called Master Plan had gotten at least half of them killed, they thought he was wonderful and they were eagerly awaiting his next stroke of genius.

“It is in my mind that you should become High Ummara of all the tribes,” Zanattar said seriously.

Harrier had been sure he’d found a nice *dark* corner to hide in between two of the tents. It was dark, but it wasn’t dark enough to hide him from the *ikulas* puppy that had followed him happily into his hiding place. All the *ikulas* were begging for scraps and being hugely indulged. They were all going to be as sick as, well, *dogs* by morning.

“It is in my mind that you are out of yours,” Harrier answered sharply. “Didn’t you idiots try that once?”

“Yes, yes,” Zanattar waved that aside. “But—Fannas! Come! Help me convince Harrier that I’m right!”

In a few moments, to Harrier’s horror, he’d been chivvied out of his hiding place and seated on a carpet surrounded by about a dozen men and women, every single one of whom thought that Harrier should become King of the Isvaieni.

“Of course you would want a council of advisors,” Ogmazad said.

“Ogmazad, I don’t want any advisors at all!” Harrier said. “Because I don’t want to be King, or High *Ummara*, or whatever you want to call it! Don’t you see what a problem you’re setting yourself up for?”

“Leaving aside this entire ‘Time of the Breaking of Tribes’ nonsense, which I, for one, never believed in for a moment,” Fannas said, waving his hand dismissively, “the tribes are broken. The desert cannot feed us. The old ways can no longer be followed—nor is there any place left where we can follow them. It is only sensible for us to make of ourselves one *great* tribe, Harrier. Yet no one will be happy should any *Ummara* of any tribe—that-is leads it. It must be you.”

“No, it must not,” Harrier said firmly. “Look. I know this is a bad time for this, but—Helafin went back to Armethalieh today, to speak to the High *Ummara* of the Nine Cities.”

“Yes,” a man named Suzat said. He was Adanate, and didn’t seem at all shy about offering his opinions in the middle of all these *Ummarai* and *chaharums*. “And she will bear your words to the High *Ummara* that the Isvaieni have done no wrong.”

“She will tell Chief Magistrate Vaunnel what happened here,” Harrier said cautiously. “And Chief Magistrate Vaunnel will send another Commission of Inquiry—this time with Militia to back it up. If they get here and find a High *Ummara* of all the tribes, they are going to want that person to swear a Consular Oath to the Magisterium. . . to become *chaharum* to Armethalieh.” *And I can’t do that, so even if I thought someone becoming king was a good idea, it wouldn’t be me. In fact, when Chief Magistrate Vaunnel’s Commission shows up, I intend to be nowhere to be found. . .*

“And this is why it must be you,” Zanattar said in triumph. “For you are from the north, and they will believe you.”

“And this is why it must be *no one*,” Harrier said, getting to his feet. “If you don’t have a king, he can’t be forced to swear a Consular Oath. And if you can’t figure out why that’s a good thing, I’m not wasting my time tonight explaining it to you. Go. Celebrate. We won.”



HARRIER didn’t bother to hide this time, and he didn’t worry about hurting peoples’ feelings. He simply got away from the light and the drumming—where the hell had they gotten drums?—and the singing as quickly as he could. Light knew they deserved their celebration, but Harrier had never felt less like celebrating something in his entire life. He didn’t get very far into the dark before he ran into Tiercel. Only he didn’t—*run* into him. He’d known where Tiercel was the entire time. Not because of the Wild Magic, but because of the Dragonbond. Until the day one or the other of them died, Harrier was *always* going to know where Tiercel was, and what he was feeling.

And Tiercel would know the same about him.

He’d never be alone, never free, never able to choose something that Tiercel and Ancaladar really didn’t approve of.

No secrets. No privacy. No freedom. For a moment Harrier felt a paralyzing sense of suffocation. It was the thing he’d hated most about the life he’d been supposed

to have back in Armethalieh. It was the thing he'd been so happy to abandon when he'd followed Tiercel on what he'd thought was an insane delusional quest. And not only did he have those restrictions back again, there was no place he could ever go now to escape them, not even inside his own thoughts.

Kareta had said the MagePrice was a high one.

"I hate parties," both of them said in chorus. Harrier made a rude noise and Tiercel poked him in the shoulder—unerringly—in the darkness.

"I want to go up there again," Tiercel said, pointing at the top of Telinchechitl.

"That's stupid," Harrier said. Tiercel shrugged, a dim shape in the illumination of distant lanterns. Harrier could—almost—grasp why Tiercel wanted to do it. He knew Ancaladar knew. He also knew that Ancaladar wouldn't give them information about each other unless it was an emergency. That was a small mercy. Harrier could almost feel normal, at least for a little while longer.

"Come on, then," Harrier said after a moment. The two of them began walking toward the staircase. Even though Bisochim was dead, the staircase remained. It had been made with magic, but magic had only shaped the molten stone. The stone itself was perfectly ordinary.

Earlier in the evening someone had set a pair of lanterns—true lanterns, not Coldfire—on the bottom steps. As they approached the stairs, they saw Shaiara sitting on the center of the bottom step, staring out into the night. "Armethalieh wasn't even touched," Tiercel said quietly. "The Isvaieni were nearly wiped out."

Harrier didn't need the Dragonbond to know what Tiercel was thinking now—he had sixteen years of knowing Tiercel: *She ought to hate us. Why doesn't she?*

"Instruction is the only gift freely given," Harrier quoted. "I don't say that any of the people who died *wanted* to. But they all died so that the Firecrown could learn something."

"Wildmage wisdom?" Tiercel asked. He sounded tired. The shock of victory and of reunion with Ancaladar was beginning to wear off.

"I'm not that smart," Harrier answered. "You're the one who told me that."

At the sound of their voices, Shaiara roused herself from her reverie and stood.

"Tyr wants to go back to the top of Telinchechitl," Harrier said to her. "He didn't have enough fun up there the last time. Would you like to join us?"

"I had thought that perhaps things between us might have changed," Shaiara said with quiet dignity.

"Uh, would you like me to . . .?" Tiercel began.

"*Go somewhere?*" Harrier finished, his voice suddenly savage. "That's the problem. You can't, can you? You and Ancaladar could be in Armethalieh and you'd still be just as close to me as you are right now. So you might as well stay right here." He turned back to Shaiara. "My feelings haven't changed. You said you chose me for as long as it pleased Sand and Star to grant us. Of course, we thought that would be about a fortnight. I won't hold you to it."

"Fool of a northern Blue Robe!" Shaiara spat, turning her back on him and beginning to climb. "Bring the lanterns. It is night, and these stairs are dark."

"I think she likes you, Har," Tiercel said. He sounded as if he was trying not to laugh.

"Shut up," Harrier answered gravely. "I think you're talking about my wife."

Both of them felt the warm rush of Ancaladar's amusement.



WITH nothing more than two small lanterns to light their way, they had to be careful as they climbed, but neither Tiercel nor Harrier wanted to create a ball of Coldfire—or MageLight—to see by. Tiercel couldn't tell whether this trip up the stairs seemed to take longer than the last one had, because he actually didn't remember much of the last one. He didn't remember very much at all about the day from before the wonderful, horrible, ridiculous, glorious, *terrifying* moment that he'd been reunited with Ancaladar and the battle that followed. He'd spoken to more than two dozen of the men and women of the Hundred today, and all of them had given him the same answer: no matter how they'd reckoned the passage of time—breaths or heartbeats or the movement of shadows across the ground—from the moment the wall of MageShield appeared around the Black Dogs to the moment it vanished from around Ahairan's entire army had been less than five minutes. Five minutes to change his life forever. His, Harrier's, Ancaladar's—everyone's who Bonded to a dragon from this moment on, everyone who was Bonded to a dragon right now. No dragon would ever have to die again. And if that wasn't enough, they'd created an entirely new kind of magic, because he wasn't a Wildmage any more than Harrier was a High Mage—but through Ancaladar, their magics were fused and blended. He suspected that soon there'd be High Mages everywhere again, Bonding to dragons and Wildmages—or to Elven Mages. The future would be filled with more magic than ever before.

But at such a cost.



THE three of them reached the platform at the top of the stairs. There was plenty of light here; in the dark, the glow from the molten rock that filled the mountain's hollow core glowed bright gold. Tiercel thought about how close he'd come to being *in* it today, and he thought about what that would have felt like. He shuddered. He hoped—He wished—

"Stop it," Harrier said quietly.

Tiercel was about to deny that he was doing anything—although that was probably hopeless—when Ancaladar swooped down for a graceful landing. Fortunately he didn't land on the platform itself, but on the lip of the *tehuko* beside it—and to Tiercel's surprise, Saravasse did the same thing on the other side.

"Would you like a dragon?" Harrier said to Shaiara. He gestured toward Saravasse, who hissed at him again.

"*One* dragon in my tent is enough," Shaiara said repressively. "I have no desire to have my life ruled by magic."

"I promise that I will stay outside, Shaiara," Ancaladar said meekly. Tiercel was always impressed that someone that large (and that intimidating-looking) could manage to give the impression of a penitent house cat so easily.

"All right," Harrier said briskly. "We're up here—roasting like a goat on the coals—is it too much to ask why?"

"I wanted to talk to someone," Tiercel answered, turning to face the Lake of Fire. "You! You lied to me! You said if we brought Ahairan here—and a Dragonbond Mage sacrificed himself to you freely—Ahairan would be bound!"

"*Are you out of your mind?*" Harrier yelped, grabbing for him. "We just won! Do *not* taunt the Great Power on the edge of the *tehuko*, Tyr!"

"I did not lie."

Suddenly a man-shaped figure stood on the very edge of the platform, but it wasn't the form of the Firecrown that Tiercel knew. This was a shape formed of Fire Itself, its identifiable shape nothing more than a courtesy to them.

"You said—" Tiercel began, and stopped abruptly. It wasn't like having somebody (Harrier) yell *shut up* in his ear, but there really wasn't any other way for him to think of it.

"Please, will you tell us what you *did* say?" Harrier asked. Tiercel had never heard Harrier sound so . . . polite.

"One who was anointed by the New Magic Called to Me, and I came, and these words I spoke to him upon the sand: *If a Dragonbond Mage gives up his life at My Shrine entirely of his own free will, then shall Ahairan be dealt with in a fashion pleasing to you,*" the Firecrown answered. "And one did. And so it was."

“Oh . . . *Light*,” Tiercel said, in sudden realization. “That wasn’t a promise. That was a *prophecy*.” He turned to Harrier. “The—the—the—the Firesprites. They had the gift of prophecy. They were known for it.”

“And you just *now* decided to mention this?” Harrier said in stunned exasperation.

“I didn’t think it was important. I asked for help, and the Firecrown said it would bind Ahairan . . . No. You said you *could* bind her for as long as Telinchechitl burned, not that you would,” he said to the Firecrown.

The Firecrown inclined its head regally.

“Yeah, this is why we don’t go summoning up Great Powers and making bargains with them,” Harrier said. “Come on. We’re done here. Say goodbye. Now.” Tiercel could hear the disgust in Harrier’s voice. He just hoped the Firecrown couldn’t.

“Thank you for your help. We’re leaving soon—very soon. We aren’t coming back. I’m sure the Elves still know the terms of the treaty they made with your people. We’ll find out what it is. We’ll honor it,” Tiercel said hastily.

“That is acceptable,” the Firecrown answered.

Tiercel wasn’t sure whether it stepped backward off the platform, or simply dissolved, but between one moment and the next, the man-shaped form of flame was gone in a shower of sparks.

“I can’t believe you don’t know the difference between a promise and a prophecy,” Harrier said crossly. Even without the Dragonbond, Tiercel had learned a long time ago how to tell when Harrier was covering up worry for somebody’s safety with a show of bad temper.

“Destroyed is better than bound,” Ancaladar said firmly. “And—as I know well—while one may invoke the Ancient Powers, and even petition them, one may never compel them. All goes as the Wild Magic wills.”

“Oh, don’t mention the Wild Magic to me just now,” Harrier snapped, pulling Tiercel back toward the stairs. “The results are great, but I’m not happy with the methods. If the Wild Magic had wanted to finally pay off Vielly Whasises MagePrice, it could have come up with a better method than *starting a war*.”

Trust Harrier Gillain to decide that the Fourth Endarkened War was entirely designed by the Wild Magic to annoy him, Tiercel thought, digging in his heels. “Fine. There’s a *tehuko* right behind you, and I know you’ve got your Three Books with you right now. Toss them in and renounce the Wild Magic.” He hadn’t exactly meant it as a joke, but sometimes the only way you could get Harrier’s attention was to say something so outrageous that it made him stop and think. To Tiercel’s alarm, Harrier actually seemed to be taking his suggestion seriously. What would happen to the Bond if Harrier *did* renounce the Wild Magic? What would happen to him and to Ancaladar?

But after a moment, Harrier smiled just a little. “Somebody has to keep the two of you out of trouble, and I figure it’s probably going to take a Knight-Mage to do it. Come on. Let’s get out of here before this thing either explodes again or Saravasse decides to push me into it.”