

THE STARSWORD



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The Starsword

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Magician

1

One of the foreign horses in the castle courtyard whinnied nervously, drawing my eyes downward. Instantly I regretted looking. Not that I was exactly afraid of heights — princes raise their sons to admit fear of nothing save the Immortal Gods — but ground and moat looked so far *down!*

Five times the height of a tall man separated me from the narrow strip of ivy-overgrown earth between stone wall and moat. I closed my eyes against the sight and swallowed the spinning vertigo that rose from belly to throat, pressing my body hard against sun-warmed granite and vines. Our warriors and the other castle-folk waited inside these walls. No one could see me out here on the moat side and halfway up the east wall of the watchtower. Likely they would not even hear my cry if I fell.

I shook that thought from my mind. A dozen deliberately slow breaths later I tilted my head back and opened my eyes skyward. The window I needed still lay thrice a man's height beyond my reach. The ancient ivy had borne my weight thus far. Surely its vines would hold that last distance. Glossy leaves prickled my naked belly as I pulled myself up, fingers and bare toes finding easy purchase on the rough stems or between granite blocks where the mortar had weathered away. *Should I fall now, I reasoned, I might be*

high enough to fling myself backwards into the moat rather than land on the bank. Perhaps.

A slow, concentrated climb took not quite eternity. Carefully not thinking of the distance to the ground, I moved one hand or foot at a time, careful of my purchase with three secure grips before moving the fourth. *Climbing this wall*, I told myself firmly, *is just like climbing the mountainsides with our forester in pursuit of curly-horned mountain sheep*. He had taught me the importance of deliberate movement and security of grip. Concentrating my mind purely on the mechanics of climbing, I felt a thrill of surprise when I found myself nose to nose with a leering gargoyle. One hand patted its deformed head for luck, carefully keeping clear of its terrible fanged mouth. That it was merely carved stone, I knew; but why take more chances than I must? Arched batwings of black basalt gave me the purchase I needed to lever myself up and onto the carving. The earth lay no closer when I looked down, but with my damp buttocks perched safely on the gargoyle's stony back and my legs hanging down alongside its bony ribs, the deadly pull lost its hold on me. I would not descend by that route.

After that sun-blasted outer wall, the paving stones of the archers' passageway felt wonderfully cool beneath my bare feet. Tall, slotted windows kept the sun's heat at bay. I still dripped from my brief swim across the moat to the tower wall, but these traces of my passing held no importance. Even had we not been at peace, the prince had ordered everyone out into the courtyard, guards and all. The tall gate-tower stood empty saving himself and Arnath and the newcomer.

A horse whinnied again inside the castle, sounding even more distant now I had entered the archers' passageway. Everyone knows how sensitive horses are to magic and all things supernatural. The old wise-woman who lived in the woods to the northeast of our encircling mountains always made my own mount nervous. I reckoned that the magician who had ridden in just before noon, attended by one odd servant leading a string of half a dozen pack animals, looked a good deal more supernatural than she.

Voices from the Great Hall floated up the stairs into the passage. My father spoke, his voice blurred by stone and distance. Then a voice I didn't know, a peculiar singsong accent coloring the words even with walls between us. The magician, unless someone else had entered while I climbed. Arnath obviously had nothing to say, not that it would be worth hearing if he had. I strained my ears to make out their meaning. No luck.

As I stood with the archer's windows at my back, the wooden stairs descended to my right. They wound along the outer wall, taking an eighth of the distance around the tower to drop to the next floor of storage rooms, another eighth to the next floor down, both identically laid out to this one except for their lack of exterior windows. Finally wider and shallower stone steps took a full half-turn along the high-ceilinged Great Hall on the ground floor where Father held audience. That route was easy, but anyone glancing up from the floor of the Great Hall would surely spot me before I could reach decent earshot.

If I could find the secret way, though, the escape passages would bring me close enough to hear without being seen.

The same master craftsmen who made my hideous impromptu seat had carved the torch sconces in the tower and those throughout the villa across the courtyard. Each naked cherub had been sculpted from creamy marble and painted real as life, about the size of a three-summer's child and comely as the basalt gargoyles outside were hideous. Castle rumor had it that the master-sculptor had used my brother and me as his models. In fact his work had graced these walls well over a century before our births. Their paint, granted, had been renewed somewhat more recently. The one I sought played a harp, the instrument braced on his crossed legs and his eyelids drooping and wings half-folded about himself in sensuous enjoyment of his eternal, silent music.

I counted one two three four stones east of the naked little harpist and one two away from the wall. That one. It looked no different from all the others in this narrow passageway, of course. Gods grant that I remembered correctly. When I knelt to insert the bronze blade of my dagger through the dust-filled crack along the south edge, a shaggy red-gold curtain fell across my eyes. The fall of hair gave me absent reminder that I must either have it cut short or start to braid it. Dangerous for a warrior, this length. Too short to pad inside a helm, long enough unbound for an opponent to grab.

I swept the dripping fringe back and probed again. If my blade proved too short to reach that hidden catch ... Ah! Heavy counterbalances swung the stone up with the faintest creak. I descended narrow wooden stairs, very careful to pull the concealed trap-door down over my head and latch it securely.

Now darkness enwrapped me, blacker than a moonless night. Thick dust on the wood beneath my bare feet congealed into mud where my wet loincloth dripped down

my legs. No servants ever came here to clean because only the prince, his heir, and his captain of the guard knew the secrets of these passages. And me, of course, but I counted for nought in the authority of this stronghold.

My teeth clicked hard enough to hurt when I took what I thought was the last step down and found it level instead. Stone lay cold underfoot once more as I blindly continued down the close-walled passageway as rapidly as I dared. One shoulder brushed metal sooner than I expected. I froze at the touch, recognizing the trip-bar that released a massive bronze portcullis to seal the escape passage behind the dais and frustrate pursuit. They'd have heard that, all right! I inched past it carefully, my naked back scraping damp and chilled against the granite of the opposite wall, and felt my way around the last corner. I tugged at the inset handle in the wall of stone. It refused to move. Had I made it this far, only to be frustrated by the last barrier?

Gripping it with both hands, I braced one foot against the wall and pulled, hard. The entire section of wall pivoted slowly, its massive bronze hinges blessed and magicked to silence by a priest of Orm perhaps a century or more gone. Gasping for breath as quietly as I could, I slipped through the narrow opening into the recess behind the throne. Dim streaks of light marked the edges and bottom of the tapestry that hung across the hidden alcove.

Now the voices reached me clearly. The wizard, his singsong tones low and silky, spoke in obvious reply. "...not discount the power of magic, O Prince of Haldêlor."

My father replied in his familiar world-weary voice: "I have told you, Ralvos, Barros is now Prince of Haldêlor, not I. I have not been so for many years. You Initiates lose track of this world. When last we met, my beard was black and my lands secure. Time has changed all this."

"Time," the sorcerer intoned. It was a voice calculated to send shivers down spines, especially mine, hidden and still in the cold dark of the passage. Stone walls and floor sucked the warmth through my still-damp flesh from my very marrow. *I* shivered, right enough. "Time eventually runs out for all men. Even for such as I, M'lord Trevigoth. Many things have I seen during a span equal to generations of mortal men. Yet you observe that I, too, grow old. Soon I must renew myself or ... die. We counted ourselves allies once, even friends. It is little enough I ask of you."

I had never heard my father laugh like that before, nor would I care to hear that

weary and cynical note again. “Aye, and it’s little enough that I can offer. Did you not look around as you rode this way? Barros’ guards at the valley entrance to the south, face to face with my own across the border. Farms and serfs, my vineyards, this castle. No more than these remain to me.”

“You could regain...”

“No!” Father almost shouted. Then he lowered his voice with an obvious effort.

“No. We will not speak of that.”

My brother’s rumbling if still uncertain bass voice objected, “Father, you might at least hear his proposal.”

I searched for an eye hole in the back side of the tapestry. The wretched thing was easily two hundred years old; surely moths must have eaten holes. But the thick wool frustrated me. Still, I could imagine Father’s lined and bearded face as he replied, “How many times must I say no? Arnath, how could a child of four summers hope to understand the events those fifteen years ago? We struggled hopelessly in a war that Barros seemed foreordained to win. Despite my army, my spies, my mercenaries. Despite even a master magician.”

“But not I.”

The magician’s voice held no irony that I could detect, ears wide in my hiding place.

“No man could say where you had gone, O Ralvos.” My father’s shrug was evident from his voice alone. “Eventually, we knew the same thing, my enemy and myself. Even could I somehow to snatch victory from defeat, Haldêlor lay a supine and easy prey for any other ambitious neighbor. My land, my people were utterly spent. Drained by years of war. But so was Barros, nearly. We made a truce through the priests of Karkos and met face to face. Our magicians agreed to summon a third, Zaldunnthé, a famous Master of your own Innermost Circle.”

“Zaldunnthé,” the magician said slowly. “Oh yes, I know Zaldunnthé.” Were I any judge of voices, Ralvos and Zaldunnthé did not count themselves the best of friends.

But my father took little note of the wizard as he continued the oft-told tale of his exile. “So the priests settled the matter. I surrendered to Barros all my lands, saving this valley. I kept what little remained of my wealth, such as the war had not bled away. My personal guards. To enforce this agreement, Zaldunnthé cast his spells. Not Barros nor

any in his employ may enter this valley. On the other hand, I and mine may not leave it. I do not think that even you, O Ralvos, would lightly attempt the unweaving of such magic.”

“To be sure, Zaldunthé is ... quite skillful. There would still be ways, for a strong and willing man,” came the persuasive reply.

“I find I am neither after these many years.” Father’s tone left no doubt. It was of a piece with his earlier laugh.

“As you will. I still pray your sanctuary.” The magician didn’t ask for much. Our family had always been hospitable to travelers, as the Gods and custom demand of us all. Father Talithos told us often enough how Lord Rholam disguises himself as a mortal to walk among men. The God rewards those who showed proper manners and hospitality, and woe betide those who do not. “The Immortal Gods witness I need a secure place for a time. I must renew myself before I undertake to penetrate Karkos’ Sanctum, wherein lies the Starsword.”

Arnath again. “The Starsword! That old Harper’s invention?”

“I assure you it is no myth. I — Hsst!” The magician’s warning dissolved into a strange language, the words somehow peculiar and wrong, even perverse. If the stone gargoyles along our walls came to hideous life, they would converse and blaspheme in such a tongue. The odd phrase rolled from his lips for maybe five heartbeats. Then silence.

Arnath, predictably, spoke first. “Master Ralvos, what...”

“Be silent. One listens to us. There.”

“The passage!” Arnath’s voice overlaid the sound of bronze hissing free of leather.

Rholam help me! They knew I hid behind the tapestry. But when I would whirl to run, I discovered that my legs would not stir, nor my arms. Try as I might, I could not so much as twitch a finger. Some implacable force bound me in place, a stone statue trapped between stone walls. I could not even open my mouth to cry out my mounting terror. Panic might have turned my bowels to water, but even they had frozen like mountain ice.

The heavy tapestry jerked to one side along its hanging-pole. Sudden light blinded me as I stood unable to lift a hand to shield my eyes. I discerned no more than the black silhouettes of Arnath and the magician, one holding his sword and the other a staff.

“Hulvan!” My brother’s tone turned my name into the usual insult. He sheathed his blade contemptuously. Oddly, this familiar response killed my panic and freed my mind of its helpless gyrations, even while my body remained imprisoned by its own chilled flesh.

The sorcerer tapped the center of my chest with his staff. It hurt like being stabbed with an icicle, but I could not pull back, must bear it helplessly. Then he set its end on the stone and stepped closer, the fingers of his left hand twining into my damp hair to tilt my head back without effort. I could no more resist than flee, yet strangely the touch felt more like caress than capture. His dark eyes probed into my own so deeply they might be examining my mind and soul beyond. “And who might this pretty little spy be? Some serving wench’s naked brat?”

Arnath slapped his thigh with an uproarious laugh. Father, standing beside his poor wooden throne, not so much as gilded, gave a sour look that I could see even through the glare of light. “That is my younger son.”

Ralvos’ hand yanked away from my hair as though burned. He may have paled slightly, but his singsong voice remained smooth as ever. “Your pardon, Prince Trevig-oth. His mode of dress...”

“Is perhaps more suitable for his age and the day’s warmth than brocaded robes. Hulvan?” A note of concern entered Father’s voice. “What ails you, boy?”

“It is nothing, the merest spell of binding I have set upon him,” said the magician quickly. “He is unharmed. One moment.” He murmured a phrase under his breath and laid that soft hand upon my head again. I nearly collapsed as the rigidity suddenly dissolved from my limbs. My thumping heart desired instant flight back through the dark passage. But no, disgrace enough attended my discovery and capture. Besides, I did not doubt the wizard could stop me with another word. I strode into the room with a show of confidence I did not feel, bowed properly to my father, then turned to show equal respect to the magician as he followed me. The barest quirk of a smile might have twitched beneath the thin man’s droopy mustache when he nodded to acknowledge my bow.

Father motioned me closer. When I stood directly before him, he glared down at me and demanded, “What in Orm’s name were you doing back there, boy?”

My eyes dropped beneath his forceful gaze. I studied the hairline crack between the waxed marble paving stones beneath my feet. The passageway grime had turned my

bare toes black where vine sap had made them sticky. “I wanted to know what was going on.”

“Look at me when you speak!” he barked harshly.

“Yessir!” My eyes snapped up to meet his as our voices echoed back from the granite walls and fading tapestries of the audience hall. Oh, Gods. This would cost me dearly. I had embarrassed him, and before a man of great standing.

“Better. And what did you hear?” He drummed his fingers on the arm of this throne irritably.

“Only a little.” I paused. He waited, frowning, fingers tapping. With no other sound in the hall, the silence pressed me into the marble paving. Finally I swallowed and went on, “About the sorcerer — Master Ralvos wanting a place to stay. About the Starsword.”

Father stroked his beard, grown long over the winter and not yet trimmed summer-short. “Look, boy, when I command everybody to leave the tower, don’t you think I want privacy? Freedom from big ears with direct routes to still bigger mouths?”

“Yes, Father. But you didn’t forbid me to come back in afterwards,” I replied, quite reasonably I thought.

He scowled at my logic. “That’s sophistry. Merest quibbling. I shall have harsh words with the scribes and perhaps even Father Talithos. Clearly your tutoring leaves something to be desired. Now, I watched Arnath bar the courtyard doors, and the exits of the secret ways are always locked from the inside. How did you come to be in the escape passage?”

I told my tale, though mentioning nothing of my, well, concern about falling from the vine-clad wall. Father nodded slowly. “Clever,” he conceded. “And bold. Very bold indeed. My grandfather’s architect did not command those archers’ windows set three and four stories high just to make the tower look elegant. Still, you disobeyed me, Hulvan, in the spirit if not the word of my instructions. What punishment shall I set for you?”

I looked back at the floor, unable to meet his gaze any longer. “As you command, Father.”

“Hmph.” His fingers drummed against the hardwood arm of his throne for another dozen heartbeats. “Into your room for the rest of the day. No dinner. Consider that I probably should exercise the flat of my sheathed sword against that half-bare backside

of yours. Tomorrow promptly at sunrise — promptly, you hear me? — you show yourself on the practice field with Elath. You've been lazy about your weapons work all winter. It will do you good. Now get out of here."

"Yessir." Again I bowed formally to Father, respectfully to our new guest, and turned toward the front doors. Arnath beat me to them, unbarred and swung them both wide with a still wider grin as he mocked my bows with one almost to the floor. I snarled silently at him with about as much effect as a boy's wooden practice blade against boiled-leather and bronze armor. Ralvos' spell must have lingered on me still. I felt awful. Bad enough to be captured by that strange magic, caught helpless as a pigeon snared in lime. But now my so-superior older brother would never let me forget it.

Crossing the sun-blasted courtyard to the villa felt like running a gauntlet. I fancied every slave and servant's eye turning my way, every child's curiosity, every warrior's mouth already whispering sideways about my disgrace. And naturally the courtyard had filled with them all, a visit by a magician not being a thing which occurred on a regular basis in our secluded valley. The whispers following me certainly were not merely my imagination.

With the door to my own chambers bolted top and bottom against anyone who might gloat on my imprisonment, I perched on the wide window-seat. My bedroom overlooked the lake, only one story up since there was no land below the villa walls from which to mount an attack. The lake itself stretched far away to the north, overshadowed by and reflecting back our encircling mountains. Its waters lapped the windowless lower walls of the castle and fed the deep moat which surrounded us on the other three sides. Now I wrapped dust-gray knees with vine-prickled arms, staring sightlessly at the distant shore.

The session with Elath counted for nothing. The captain would work me hard, sure, but he always did. An hour in the baths and some time on the massage table under the skillful hands of a eunuch would cure my purely physical aches. Elath could inflict nothing like the humiliation I felt now. Every scullery-maid would gossip about it, and Arnath only too glad to tell the tale to any who asked.

How, all You Gods, how had the magician known I was behind that tapestry?

Captain Elath was not pleased with my performance, not pleased at all. He told me so. Worse, he demonstrated his displeasure by thrashing me without mercy. Time and again his weighted wooden blade smashed through my feeble guard and into ribs, arms, shoulders, legs. My practice armor did little to protect me. I attempted to turn the battle back at him with notable lack of success.

Finally the captain held up his hand for a rest, and just in time, too. My chest heaved beneath my leather breastplate like a wind-broken horse, my dry throat tasted of hot bronze, and the edges of my vision had gone all black. “Hulvan,” our chief warrior said heavily, “everything I taught you over the fall and winter has gone. Every single thing. Your style — well, let’s pray to Orm that He Shield you, because you aren’t shielding yourself.”

I collapsed onto the trampled grass. The strength had fled my legs, and I hurt all over. I could not even care that half a dozen little boys, by some mysterious castle process awake and about before their classes began in the chapel of Rholam, had gathered to watch my humiliation. My helmet hit the ground with a dull clank when I unstrapped it. Sullen even to my own ears, my voice demanded, “What’s so wrong with my style?”

“Not a thing, if your name is Arnath and you are twice as large as Hulvan.” The captain sat as well, laying his lead-weighted wooden sword to one side carefully so that the point did not stab the earth. “He possesses the reach and strength of a giant from some Harper’s ballad. You have not. He’s big and strong and direct, and not many men carry enough bronze to cross his sword. You, my Lord Hulvan, are not that large.”

This hardly made a Harper’s news-song. I’d heard it all my life, mostly from Arnath. As my breathing eased and my vision cleared, I pulled my dagger out and toyed with it unthinkingly. Flip, catch by the flat of the blade; flip-flop, blade again; flip and a half to the hilt and twist and thrust back into the sheath at my side without so much as looking down. I could do anything with a dagger. A heavy broadsword, though... “So what’s the point of all this practice if I can never be as good as my brother? Why don’t you just train him?”

“And did I say you would not make a good swordsman? I said not as big as your

brother. Hardly the same thing.” He hesitated. Obviously he decided to trust the ancient feud the world knew existed between his prince’s sons. He pitched his next words to reach only my ears. “Lord Arnath is already strong as a bear and will grow even stronger. You have only to look at him to know that. But his swordplay possesses neither subtlety nor wit. A man might argue that he doesn’t need it. Give him a good two-handed blade and watch him shear through shield, blade, armor, flesh, it doesn’t matter. The Gods know I would not stand foot to foot against him, and I carved his first toy dagger while I was a junior decurion in the palace guard at City Haldé.”

The captain smiled at a memory, his gaze somewhere past my shoulder. “Rholam witness that was one gorgeous little boy, all toothy grin and blond hair. One could see even then that he had the makings of a big man.” He shook the memory away and pulled a linen square from somewhere inside his boiled-leather practice armor to wipe his face. “You aren’t exactly without your own strengths, Hulvan. They are just different. Like speed.” His hand flashed toward me.

I intercepted with the dagger which materialized in my hand again, at the same time rolling back and sideways in a clang of hard boiled leather and bronze. Before I had time for thought I stood with feet spread shoulder-wide, perfectly balanced, blade ready — and his handkerchief impaled on my dagger.

Elath chuckled. The watching children also laughed, somewhat nervously and from a suddenly greater distance. I relaxed and pulled the cloth free, returned it with an exaggerated courtier’s bow and flourish to the captain, then turned to make a deeply mocking bow toward the little boys. Not half a dozen, more like ten now. I knew them all by sight if not by name, children of servants or slaves for the most part.

Enorath looked to be the oldest, certainly the tallest. He couldn’t have stood more than two or three finger-widths shorter than me even though he was a couple of summers younger. Castle rumor claimed that Elath had fathered him on Telarra, one of the chambermaids. She had born two more since Enorath, a girl and another boy still at the breast, by an assistant cook who had Named them both in the Temple before Dalonna and Orm and Karkos. The younger two looked nothing like their eldest brother save perhaps about the slightly canted hazel eyes and freckled snub nose they all shared. Certainly that one had the captain’s squared-off look about him. Elath, I knew, generally preferred the heartier embrace of another warrior — but nor had he ever actually denied

the rumors about Enorath.

Hidarros, our chief cook's oldest boy, stood half a hand shorter than Enorath but cast a somewhat wider shadow if one were merely polite about it. Like Enorath he would count twelve summers this coming ShieldDay. No, a summer older; he had been apprenticed to his father's kitchen for a year now. That made him the oldest boy in the crowd. Cook's younger boy Syarin must be rising eleven summers, then, a solid enough lad but a veritable reed against his brother. Two more about nine or ten summers each whose names I could not recall in my present state, children from nearby villages sent to study at Talithos' chapel school. Another five between four and eight summers.

Kolldoï's Chariot had yet to burn the dew off the grass, and this spring morning had felt cool before Elath started on me; but only Hidarros wore more than a thong about his hips to support the usual charm of Rholam. He sported a bright red knit pouch, clearly new. The tie-strings looped over his hip-thong and then back under and three times criss-crossed around his dagger in the "look, I'm a boy!" style, separating it from his shields and holding it upright or as near upright as his very round belly allowed. In my present state of mind boyhood fashions held no interest. All I needed was every kid in the castle seeing my newest humiliation. Where was that stupid priest, anyway? Talithos had never let me get away with skipping lessons before my twelfth summer.

"You see?" Elath asked when I sat down again. He had even less interest in clothing style than I. "Had I thrown a knife at your face, you would be unmarked. Speed, Hulvan. Speed and wit. Don't always compete with your brother."

"Easy to say." I picked up my helmet. Hinges creaked as I swung one cheek-plate back and forth. It needed oiling. My job. Any warrior who plans to live long enough to make himself a name looks after his own weapons and armor and horse. "If Arnath half-kills himself trying to stay on a war-horse he can barely ride, people call it youthful high spirits, a young warrior showing his mettle. I fall off Sidarra going full gallop and hands-free around your practice marks yet land unharmed. Everyone chides me for foolhardiness. I throw my javelins halfway the length of the field and hit the target every time. Orm knows, they peg square in the heart-mark four times out of five. Be certain that someone will remind me Arnath could already hurl a grown man's weapon when he was my age and that half again as far. Never mind that he can't actually hit the courtyard

wall from inside the castle. I don't try to compete with my brother, M'lord Captain. It just happens to be that way."

Elath sighed at the truth of my words. "I know. I know. But if you were a bit less ... abrasive? You really must try to get along with your brother, Hulvan. He may need you some day."

"Him need me? Hah! He's the elder, Father's Heir." I waved a hand vaguely at the castle, across to the barley sprouting green and new in the southern fields. "You think this little valley can support two masters?" I knew all the traditional fates of younger brothers quite well by now. Arnath had made quite certain of that.

The captain made a noncommittal sound in his throat and rose in a clamor of leather and metal. "Enough idle talk. Helm on. Fasten that chin-strap, too, Hulvan, you know better. Take a glancing blow on the battlefield and it will save your life. Lose your helmet and the next blow will kill you sure. Back on your feet. All right, guard up. Think speed. If you let my blade within a span of you, it's because you aren't trying." He stabbed upward in a disemboweling attack, with no warning and a bloodcurdling scream that sent little boys scabbling backwards in delighted terror: "*Yaaah!*"

Three-quarters of an hour later I had to ask one of the eunuchs to help unstrap my armor. My own arms would barely lift away from my sides, and not just from pain. The morning's session had ripped the strength from me. Elath whistled low and pushed the fellow back. He unstrapped my greaves and arm-guards himself while two slaves gently worked the bracers off my forearms. Next they unbuckled my kilt of bronze-studded leather strips and untied the boiled-leather jerkin closures down my ribs beneath my armpits. Then the captain peeled my padded linen undertunic over my head as gently as his callused fingers allowed. The eunuchs even helped me raise my arms high enough when it was obvious I could not manage that much without aid.

Elath's hard fingertips probed painfully along my ribs as he felt for breaks. "Orm's Spear! I didn't mean to hit you quite so hard, M'lord. You, standing there like a goose, yes, you boy. Run to the guards' quarters and tell whoever you find there that I require the strong salve from my locker. The blue one. Hop it!"

The youngest of our eunuchs, Asev scampered up the stairs for the guards' quarters without waiting to tie on a breechclout. The Gods knew if he'd get back anytime today.

When Elath untied my loincloth to peel it and the padded bronze cup away from

my dagger and shields, the flesh at my groin protested at even this gentle handling. I looked down at myself and wished it were someone else. The bronze cup had protected me from far worse than the oval bruise that discolored my upper thighs and belly. The alternative didn't bear thinking about. My arms and body bore red and blue and yellow streaks that would presently make black and purple bruises. Father's threatened sword-flat across my naked backside would have been far less painful. *On balance*, I told myself firmly, *I prefer these honorable wounds*.

At least when our priest of Rholam had come to collect his charges for their morning lessons he'd seen the latter part of my session when I did not so disgrace myself. That didn't make my bruised flesh hurt less as the bath-servants scrubbed sweat and grime from my skin with their pumice-blocks and coarse soap. After they doused each of us with a couple of buckets of clear water to wash away the soap, Elath helped them maneuver me into the hot pool.

I hissed in renewed pain as the water rose up my tender skin. "Karkos!" I swore at the eunuchs. "Who's the stoker today? Won't the kitchen poach eggs for you?"

They giggled in reply, knowing full well I would have accused them of carrying ice down from the mountains had it been a single degree cooler. I settled cautiously onto the bench set for my height, leaning back against the polished marble side. The intense heat slowly drew some of the stiffness from my belabored body. Water tapped my chin as the captain lowered his bulk into the pool beside me. Eyes still closed, I said, "You hardly touched me, that second round."

"Just as well," Elath replied dryly. "Prince Trevigoth ordered a heavy workout and beating as punishment, not grind you into sausage-meat."

I shrugged under the water with manly indifference while thinking the sausage-grinder sounded little worse. Still, honor forbade saying so. "It's not so bad. Nothing broken."

"I trust the lesson took. No use trying to be your brother. You should always favor a lighter, faster blade. When an enemy hacks at you, don't stop his sword directly with your own. Deflect it, redirect his force to put him off his balance. Keep him that way until you can finish him. Dodge and weave and fence properly, for Orm's sake! You'll rarely meet anyone as fast as yourself, let alone faster. Unless you fight Elves, of course, and then you'll have the strength advantage. Let your opponent's own strength and effort

wear him down. I have taught you since you could lift a wooden batten. Your skills are already better than merely adequate — when you bother to remember them.”

Praise from Elath was rarer than ice in summer and always tempered with advice and warnings. I nodded silent thanks, thinking he would at least speak well of me to Father. Presently I drowsed in the warmth.

After a long soak, the captain roused me with a gentle hand on one sore shoulder. We climbed from the hot pool looking not unlike two boiled crayfish. The bath servants lathered us with finer olive soap and rinsed us clean with buckets of tepid water. I expected the usual plunge in the cold pool, but Elath motioned for towels instead. When we both were dry he tied one about his waist and boosted me onto the rubdown table. I protested that this was the masseur’s task.

Off to the side, Reldon nodded vigorous agreement. He said nothing, of course. He never did. Someone had taken his tongue along with other bits of his anatomy, namely his shields. The Easterners grant their slaves no rights at all. Likely as not, some previous owner had simply decided that he didn’t want his bath slaves repeating gossip. I have no idea why they cut their slaves so barbarously instead of simply giving them the Draught to prevent the manhood change.

Elath tossed his head back in disagreement. “With due respect for all his skills, he’s not up to this. I, on the other hand, will certainly cause you more immediate pain, but trust me, it will relieve your injuries. Don’t argue with me, Hulvan. Just lie down on your belly. Reldon, save your strength for me. I’ll want your hardest massage afterwards.”

I obeyed, twisting slightly sideways and propping my cheek on one hand to watch. Elath mixed thick blue-purple paste from the blue ceramic jar that Asev had finally fetched with about three times as much olive oil in a brass bowl. It smelled perfectly foul. The captain saw my nose wrinkle and grinned a gap-toothed grin. “I know. Awful, isn’t it? But it will keep you from going too stiff to move. Mother Pilia down in Muln makes it for us.”

Pilia? My witch had a low opinion of Pilia, but I refrained from saying so. No one else here knew Granny. She didn’t live in the valley.

Asev took the bowl from Elath’s hand and stood to one side holding it for the captain. He gave me a good-natured grimace and mouthed “ouch” silently. The boy had two

summers more than myself, though of course as a eunuch he was fated to worship in the Chapel of Rholam all his life. The castle factor had purchased him only last summer from a traveling slave-dealer who had in turn brought him north from Danesse.

The captain dribbled a handful of smelly mixture from the bowl across my shoulders and down my back as I untwisted and put my chin on both my hands. I felt his spread hands take the measure of my shoulders. “Hmm. Perhaps I’ve not looked closely enough this past season. You grew underneath that heavy winter garb, perhaps while you hibernated like a bear. Not just these.” His thumbs poked the winter-thickened love-handles under my ribs. “After you make your final sacrifice to Lord Rholam in a year or two, you may turn out bigger than I’ve said.”

“But not as big as Arnath.” Final sacrifice. What a note of life ending and yet begun anew. He meant, of course, the ceremony in which I would shear off my hair at Lord Rholam’s altar in repayment for His protection through all the years of my boyhood. Not until I began to grow body hair could I make that offering, and only Rholam Himself knew when that might occur. Bad manners to pray for it.

The captain worked his mixture into my shoulders and neck as he said, “We’ve been through that. The size of man’s heart is his true measure, not the strength of his arm. Else bronzesmiths would be kings.”

“Elath.” I twisted halfway around to look up at him again, stopping short when my bruises pained me. “What’s so special about the Starsword?”

Hands paused on my oiled skin. “Don’t you know the tale at all?”

“Uh-uh. Oh, we gusted a Harper several years ago, when I was still little. He sang some ballad about it, I guess. But I don’t remember much of it.”

He gently turned me flat to the couch again. Fingers resumed kneading my tender flesh. They didn’t need his attention for that; Elath had been a soldier for more than thirty of his forty-eight years. “It’s not the favorite that it was in my youth. And we don’t get many of the better Harpers through this valley. I suppose the commonest tale, and the best, is of its making. Velanna knows I’m no Harper, lad.”

“And this isn’t the Great Hall at the midwinter Karkoseid, or Midsummer, or the equinox festivals of Dalonna or Dyrannthos. Ow! That’s sore.” I jerked involuntarily as he slid over a particularly nasty bruise on my shoulder.

“Sorry.” Despite the word, he continued working his salve into me, bruises and all.

I laughed wryly. “It’s sore *everywhere*. I swear you bruised the soles of my feet. Doesn’t matter. Tell me the story? Please?” Asev nodded his own request as he held out the bowl of salve. Unlike Reldon, his tongue was perfectly all right. The slave trainers in Danesse had taught him never to speak unless it was demanded of him. Our older eunuchs would eventually cure him of silence, I reckoned. Bath-eunuchs enjoyed more latitude than most other slaves, reasonable enough given the intimacy of their work. Modesty of any kind rated very little with that crew.

Elath dipped fingers into the quickly-proffered bowl. More thickened oil pattered into the small of my back. “Well. Velanna gave it to the warrior-sorcerer Vandarros. Not that She sent it in the form of the actual sword, you understand. The Goddess cast down one of Her stars; they say it flamed across the heavens like Karkos’ Ebon Chariot when He claims the soul of a great prince. The taking of the star is a legend unto itself. Vandarros sought Velanna’s gift in the gigantic hole it made for itself in its fall, fully three miles across, where the very earth had flowed like water. An army died in the winning to it and carrying it away. The ignorant folk whose land it blessed had not heard the prophecies concerning Vandarros, that he was predestined to rule a mighty empire. They ambushed and fought his men all along the way — but that is not the tale you want.”

I tossed my head back in a silent “no,” then lowered it to my crossed hands. Elath worked that foul-smelling oil down my hip and the back of my right leg now, and already it had numbed the bruises along my shoulders and ribs. Too bad it stank like rotten fruit. The captain continued: “The dead star was black and pitted, with odd shiny streaks. Vandarros summoned the greatest smiths from near and far, promising gold and riches and fame. But when they tried to work the Goddess’ metal, it defeated them. He studied and mastered their arts and made his own attempts He failed even as they. Finally he took ill with frustration and fury. His chirugeons tied him onto his bed in a terrible delirium. During his mad dreams, the Goddess sent him a vision. She melted his body in the very heart of Her sister Kolldoi’s Sun-Chariot. Next Velanna poured him, in this vision, into a bar-mold. When She broke it open, there waited Her star-metal, refined to perfection and black as Lord Karkos’ own shields. She heated it again and again, beating and folding it as it glowed white-hot, until Vandarros saw himself hammered into the sword’s shape. When the raging fever broke and his strength returned, he went

back to his forge.”

My back finished, Elath clapped his palm loudly across my right buttock, probably the only unbruised flesh I possessed above my ankles. I swung my legs over the edge, sitting up while the elderly master of the baths poured white wine into pewter goblets. Although a eunuch himself and a slave, he wore a short tunic of fine linen where the others were naked as myself in the humid warmth. The chain about his ankle was heavy silver, a mark of my father’s favor. Minthos had been in our service for longer than anyone could even remember. He had long refused any offer of his freedom. One goblet he handed to Elath. He added a measure of cold spring water to the second and gave it to me, then retreated silently to join the others. All eight bath slaves had gathered to listen attentively to the captain’s tale now, not just Asev and Reldon. My skin felt tingly-numb where Elath had rubbed in his salve. “What happened then?”

The guard captain swallowed twice and wiped his mustache with the back of one hand. At forty-eight summers the warrior’s muscles above the towel about his hips still rolled like liquid bronze beneath his hairless skin. Father, by contrast, had grown portly as a priest of Dyrannthos. “He armored himself with many potent spells, sacrificing and praying to the Goddess that She had sent a true vision. He sought out the finest, hottest-burning charcoal. Over the protests of his smiths, he raised the heat of his fire far, far beyond the proper temperature for working bronze. At last he succeeded in melting the star into white, glowing liquid. The ultimate result, as his dream foretold, was the Starsword. On your back now. This will likely hurt worse, your bruises are mostly on the front.”

The salve looked bad and smelled worse, but it worked. I swallowed the last of my wine and obeyed, lying my head back on the flat pillow. “So he made the Starsword. And then?”

“Then he led his armies to carve out an empire of the sort that had never been seen before nor since.” One hand held my left arm out straight while the other encircled my biceps, slowly pulling a film of oil and salve from shoulder to wrist. The bruises protested but quickly grew numb.

“And his heirs?”

He shook his head while his hands kneaded my arm thoroughly. “Ah. He had none. Many tales were told as to why not. Some say the Goddess was jealous of Her favorite

and allowed him no children by any mortal woman. Others claim that no man who survived the quest for the star, who dug it from the great pit that glowed in the night, ever had heir again. Vandarros established his empire and took four queens and many lovers, but had neither son nor daughter to succeed him. Am I hurting you?" He switched to my right arm, which had taken even more blows than the left. Elath possessed a truly lethal backhand swing.

A head-toss gave my silent answer. His touch held just the right combination of firmness and gentleness to work that foul concoction into my bruises. He hurt me, of course, but not enough to mention. Wine and fatigue weighted my eyelids. "What happened to him?" *Yawn.*

"As such men do, he grew arrogant in his power. One day he proclaimed that he feared no man while he held the Starsword. Some toady agreed, saying the only thing for the Great Emperor to fear was Karkos Himself. Vandarros foolishly replied that he feared not even the God. As anyone who reveres the Holy Three might expect, on that selfsame night a great cry arose from the people of his city. The northern sky flamed with Aurora's Tapestries as far south as Nooman, and not one but many flaming stars were seen to fall across the heavens." The captain had denied comparisons to a Harper, but his words made me see that long-ago sight.

Even the eunuchs appeared not to breathe, waiting to hear what happened next. "By midnight both Velanna and Rholam had fled the sky, and our Dark Lord's Chariot appeared above the palace of the Emperor. Those four black Horses, Nightmare, Terror, Panic, and Flight, may they gallop far from us, kicked his palace to rubble and trampled the entire city into the ground. Not one stone was left squarely upon another. Days later, when the people found courage to return, they discovered the Imperial Palace utterly destroyed and every building collapsed in ruins. Of Vandarros and his Starsword, indeed of his entire court, they found no trace."

"And what —" A bigger yawn threatened to dislocate my jaw. "*Faugh!* Your pardon. What about his empire?" I shifted my legs so Elath's fingers could spread the salve around my bruised thigh and groin muscles. Had he been Reldon or any other bath-eunuch, the rubdown oil would certainly spread to give my dagger and shields their attention. Naturally that independent flesh stirred at the thought. *What might this blue-purple concoction do there?* I wondered sleepily. *Numbed and pleased at the same*

time? And how would those callused warrior's hands feel on me, rubbing it in like that? Elath, as the world knew, preferred grown warriors for his bed, though he accepted the eunuchs' healthy pleasures in the baths. The backs of his fingers might brush me in passing, but he took no notice even if I did.

“Oh, the Vandarri Empire lasted many years more by sheer weight, plus the strength of the armies he had built. His nephew and adopted heir, Hildrath called the Good, tried to unite it permanently. He built cities and canals and roads. Many of the stone-surfaced roads we use to this day were laid by his engineers, straight and level and likely to last forever. But afterwards, Hildrathsson Vandarros was not the man his father had been, let alone the great-uncle he was named for. Vandarros II began to lose the fringes of the empire, and by the time of his great-grandchildren the Vandarrii ruled a mere principality no larger than any other today. So it has been ever since, a scattering of states such as your father once ruled in City Haldé, each man's hand against his neighbors...”

No doubt Elath had more to tell me, the distillate of a soldier's lifetime, rich in experience and wisdom. I didn't hear it. I had fallen asleep on the marble slab.

The bath servants had lifted me from the hard marble of the massage table onto a couch while I slept. Rholam knew how they managed it without waking me — or perhaps the Boy-God's uncle Lord Karkos, since Elath nearly beat me to death that morning. I kicked down the big towel someone had draped across me as a coverlet. My arms and ribs and thighs looked raw and had already turned purple in irregular patches. The captain had spoken truly about his salve, though; I moved far less stiffly than I had any right to expect.

Asev and Dorneth, the two youngest of our eunuchs, washed me again with coarse soap and pumice to remove the oily residue of that foul-smelling stuff. They joked about my silent grimaces and unwilling flinches under their soft hands but clearly did their best to inflict as little pain as they could. After they rinsed away the soap and oil and salve, I ducked into the hot pool before sitting stoically through a further cleaning with finer soap and flannels. A splash through the cold pool woke me thoroughly.

Some household servant had laid out fresh clothes while I slept, tunic and sandals and loincloth in place of my leather practice armor and sword. Lady Jelarris or one of her maids had chosen my garb, judging by the fancy green embroidery on the hems and breast of the fawn tunic and the carefully matched loincloth of emerald silk gauze. From the light coming through the windows onto the courtyard the day had gone a couple of hours past noon. My extremely empty stomach concurred with a growl. No dinner the night before and no breakfast either. After the morning's heavy exercise my gut had decided to wind itself around my backbone.

First I clipped my silver chain around my hips, with the sacred amulet of Rholam that no boy past his third summer could be long without. Then I twisted the middle of the hand-wide strip of green into a narrow cord and tied the feather-soft silk low around my middle, just below the chain. Leaving the short end dangling from the knot at my tailbone, I spread the longer end flat and pulled it between my legs to hold my dagger and shields, then up and over the twisted cloth cord well below my navel, dropping it to dangle in front. A quick tug on the edges and a pull at the center beneath the front flap cupped my parts as comfortably as my bruises allowed.

When I slipped my sheathed dagger between the tight-twisted strip of silk and my left hip, I felt adequately attired for the sunny warmth of a spring afternoon. The tunic could wait until evening's cool and dinner in the formal dining room with my father and brother and Lady Jelarris, whose guest suite adjoined Father's quarters discreetly as custom demanded. As for those stupid sandals, the soles of my feet were tough as any rawhide. With the ice and snow of our brief fierce winter no longer on the ground, the Gods knew what reason might exist for them.

My nose dragged me salivating to the kitchen. Hidarros spotted me and waved a hand. "Want something to eat?" he called across two tables of assistants doing various things to lamb and pastry. I nodded and slapped my stomach, regretted it instantly when my body reminded me of the morning's abuse. The younger boy scrounged a loaf of bread and threw it onto a wooden trencher, added some cheese and cold spiced lamb and pickles and other vegetables. We sat at an unused table to eat and watch the bustling men and women. The kitchen always looked chaotic to me. Somehow the entire castle ate, and ate very well indeed, but I was lost to Grosha if I could understand how. I said as much to Hidarros.

He shrugged and sliced more bread for his third sandwich. One assumed he had not missed breakfast and lunch. His hand described a vague circle that took in the kitchen and all who labored in it. "Pa knows what's going on. So do I, really. He apprenticed me last ShieldDay when I reached twelve summers. Formally, I mean. Been helping since I was little. It's pretty simple."

"To you, maybe." I made a second sandwich with the last of the bread and a double portion of lamb, spread some spicy mustard and horseradish and topped it with slices of sharp cheese and tomato and onion. "I mean, look at them all. Over there, what are those two doing?"

"Shredding cabbage for slaw," he explained around a mouthful of sandwich. "Except that woman next to them, she's making pickles."

"You have to make pickles? They don't grow, like carrots? Never mind, I don't think I want to know."

"You eating again?" Syarin appeared at our table and dropped one bare hip onto the bench half a span away from my own. "We can serve you up at the Karkoseid feast with an apple in your mouth, Hidarros, and a nice honey-glaze to crisp your skin."

“Oh, ha ha. Very funny.” Hidarros glowered around me at his brother but cut another wedge of cheese from the wheel. “At least I don’t spend all my time in the chapel.”

The younger boy shrugged the fraternal counterattack off casually. He could afford to. Where his brother really did wobble, Syarin could at worst be described as cute. His belly looked no bigger than my own just now, after too much rich food and too little exercise all winter. The old leather thong supporting his worn wooden charm circled low around his hips, stylized dagger hanging to one side of his own where it joined his body. Seated, his older brother’s belly overhung his thighs so the pouch he wore today became both invisible and irrelevant.

Syarin said as much to me as to Hidarros, “I like talking with Talithos. He’s seen a lot more than you think. D’you know he was a circuit priest in the western mountains before he became the castle priest? Over against the borders where the Ogres roam?” He turned without continuing the familiar brotherly feud, nose suddenly in the air sniffing like a hunting-hound. “What’s that?”

We both followed his lead. Despite the two heavy sandwiches I had just wolfed down my mouth watered anew at the splendid smell. We three managed to skulk within a couple of spans of the goodies before Cook’s massive shape materialized out of nowhere to scold me and both his sons away from that tray of wonderful-looking apple turnovers just coming hot and bubbling from a brick oven. No good giving sad puppy-dog eyes to Cook, I knew from past efforts. That tactic had finally gasped and died some time during my ninth summer. With a heavy sigh, Hidarros returned to clear away the scraps of our sandwiches. I gave up and left the kitchen for cooler air, Syarin in trail.

Outside, the courtyard buzzed like a dropped hornet’s nest. Off-duty warriors, Talithos and Waneela from the temple, two of Lady Jelarris’ maids, more children both free and slave-born than I could bother to count, all found some reason to idle in what little shade the walls offered from the afternoon sun while they eyed the tall tower to the left of the gate. I looked upward and thought, *What in Orm’s Holy Name are they doing in that top room? Fitting shutters?* The room atop the tower was the highest point in the castle by far, another three stories above the archers’ window I had climbed through yesterday afternoon and at least eight spans above the stubby astrologers’ spire that rose from the top floor of the villa itself. If memory served, that room was no more than a vast, empty space the full width of the tower. A couple of big trapdoors led up to the

crenellated rooftop. Great (or great-great, maybe even great-great-great — I wasn't sure) grandfather built it for storing pitch and oil for sieges, but of course we had never been besieged nor were ever likely to be. It had been unused since Father took up permanent residence, excepting the birds.

Aha, I thought. Obvious, Hulvan. Ralvos is staying. In all the tales I've ever heard of wizards, they live in caverns deep below the earth or high in towers. The Gods know why. Maybe their guild insists, so they can look down on us ordinary mortals. It must be terribly tiring, though, all those stairs to go up and down every day. Or down and up.

Periodically pairs of castle servants walked empty-handed out of the tower, across the sun-bright cobblestones of the courtyard to the stables, returning laden with trunks and bags and boxes. The magician had arrived with half a dozen oversized packhorses. No sign of the man himself, though. I wandered over to the main gate.

To my surprise Lazirra stood the afternoon duty. She counted thirty-five summers give or take; she herself wasn't exactly sure. We celebrated her name-day on Dalonna's SpringDay, in common with other castle women who didn't know the exact dates of their births. Six years before she had ridden into the valley on a second-rate pony and bluntly asked for work. The remains of her accent and the close-cropped curly dark hair named her Easterling, but she preferred to fight with short-sword and dagger in the two-handed style of the Menvyi gladiators. She bore their gladiator slave-brand on her left shoulder, too, with a green Sword of Orm tattooed through it in proof of her manumission. No one here knew anything more about her, nothing at all of her past beyond the simple fact of her gladiatorial servitude in that land.

She'd earned her place in the guard by outmatching three of Elath's best men in simulated combat with weighted wooden practice blades, all at the same time. Two of them had departed our service shortly afterwards, unable to bear the shame. The third followed her around like a love-sick puppy for weeks afterward, awkwardly mimicking her style on the practice field until she took rough pity and began to coach him properly. Even then I could see he wanted more than mere swordplay but very much doubt he got it. Like many female warriors, Lazirra competed with the men for the charms of the castle or village girls. For her own unstated reasons she had taken a liking to Prince Trevig-oth's then eight-summer son from our first meeting. Even when her notorious moods

caused all the other guards to give her a wide berth, I could usually get a smile.

“Hail, Prince Hulvan.” She drew up to rigid attention as I approached, rapping her javelin against her shield in salute. Like any guard on duty she wore a bronze helm, hers bearing the spike-plume of a decurion, plus bronze chest and back-plates over padded linen undertunic and bronze arm-guards. A kilt of studded leather strips hung down her thighs, and greaves protected her shins and knees. All her metal glittered like gold under the afternoon light of Kolldoï’s Chariot. She relaxed without being told, something she’d not have done if Father or Elath had been about. “And a good day to you, too, young Cooksson. Watched you out with Cap’n this morning, from up on the wall. Marked you a bit, did he not?”

Maybe I should have worn that tunic. No, my arms and legs would still have betrayed me. The weather had already gone too warm for long sleeves and leg-wraps. “I reckon there’s not a man in the valley he couldn’t mark if he put his mind to it.”

“As you say.” Lazirra let this feeble excuse pass. Abruptly she barked: “To your left! The beam!”

My dagger hit oak with a satisfying *thunk!* as I spun, drew, and threw in a single motion. Lazirra had appointed herself my unofficial coach in dagger. I grinned up at her.

The black horsehair spike-plume atop her helmet rippled as she gave a brief nod. “Not too bad. Now do it right-handed.”

“I’ll get it!” Syarin called, already running for the beam. He extracted my dagger with a yank from the heavy beam that double-barred the gates on the rare occasions we closed them. Quick running steps brought him back to us, the dagger held safely point-down. He offered the hilt to me. I nodded thanks and slipped it back into the sheath at my left side. Right-handed was a problem. “Show me,” Lazirra commanded. She set her javelin and shield down, moved my sheath from left hip to right. “Throw.”

I threw. It hit at a clumsy angle and stuck, just. The hilt drooped accusingly. I scowled at the wretched thing. I scowled at the beam. I scowled at Syarin, who looked innocently out through the gateway at the empty practice field.

“Ought to carry it there all the time,” Lazirra scolded. “You’ll be swinging a sword in your left, you being cack-handed, and Orm knows you can’t throw that.” She pulled her own short-sword free in a rasp of metal against hard leather. “See, you draw a sword cross-body with your right hand, well, your left, M’lord, unless you’re a-horseback and

carrying it over your shoulder cavalry style. Then if your dagger's where it ought to be, also on your right —" Her free hand blurred. A heavy leaf-bladed dagger struck the beam heart-high to a man, arrow-straight and a triple finger-width into the hard wood.

Syarin dashed forward to retrieve our weapons. He hung his full weight from the hilt of Lazirra's dagger with both hands, half chinning himself to prise it free. I spent the next half-hour practicing right-handed under her critical eye. We quickly acquired a small audience of castle children, lessons in the chapels being mornings only, but neither of us paid any attention to them. Syarin saw off two younger boys who tried to join him helping fetch our thrown daggers. In turn I twice warned him to stand farther from the beam in case I should make a truly bad throw. Not that I believed it likely, but good manners and Lord Rholam demand that one take care of younger boys who have no thought for their own safety.

A considerable number of bags and boxes exited the stables and vanished into the tower during that time. High above our heads, the village carpenter and his two sons hung the penultimate shutter.

I sheathed my blade again and paused to gesture toward the latest pair of servants carrying a box between them. "Lazirra, I thought the wizard would be riding on today, but that's his gear they're carrying into the tower, isn't it?" I hooked a thumb over my shoulder toward the servants as they struggled with a box the size of an Ogre's coffin. Odd thought. *Do Ogres cremate their dead like civilized folk? I wondered. Do they bury them under the ground like the northerners? Or do they perhaps leave them in the open air on high, hidden towers in the woods as Elves are said to do?*

She spat onto the packed earth between the open gates and the moat-bridge. "Where have you been hiding yourself, Lord Hulvan? His horses have been groomed and put to pasture, their tack cleaned and oiled. His many trunks, just like that one, got stacked yesterday and now carried up to that very tower-top. See you the shutters? He ordered the carpenter fetched this morning, like he was lord here instead of the prince your father may-the-Chariot-be-far-from-him. Prince Arnath hung about like his very shadow, saying he's to be obeyed in whatever he commands."

"It looks like he intends to guest with us for a while, then." *With*, I added mentally, *my brother interested in his welfare. Now why should that be? A wizard and a warrior?*

We went back to dagger practice. Presently I bade her farewell, rubbed my sore shoulder ruefully, and wandered over to the stable door. Four servants picked up the last two boxes. I followed them back towards the gate and casually into the tower entrance, Syarin still dogging my heels like a friendly puppy.

But he paused at the doors with his amulet of Rholam between forefinger and thumb, pressed nervously against his own bare dagger as his remaining three fingers encased his flesh protectively. “Uh, Lord Hulvan? Us kids really aren’t supposed to go in there.” He turned faintly pink under his tan while his free hand gestured toward the dais. “I mean, with Prince Trevigoth’s throne and all.”

I almost told him not to be silly but had second thoughts. Likely I might not want a witness, either. “Well, I’ll ask my father if he cares about you coming in. I’m sure it’ll be all right as long as you’re with me. But I better ask first. Next time, okay?”

He looked relieved. I wished the other castle boys would stop being so shy of me but could not work out how to achieve that given the differences in our births. “Sure. See you later.” With a nod that was half a bow he turned and trotted away, not toward the kitchen but the Temple of Three and the attendant chapels of the Younger Gods.

The Great Hall occupied the ground floor, of course. We used it little enough, and it stood echoing and empty again today, my father’s wooden throne on its low dais before that ancient tapestry of my great-however-many-great-grandfather slaying the dragon Aklostag, all teeth and flaming breath and crimson scales. Aklostag’s fearsome appearance hadn’t saved him then, and the stupid beast had done a piss-poor job of hiding me yesterday, too. Painted cherubs held unlit torches along the walls. The wide stairs ran in a slow half-spiral from the northwest, up the north wall and back around to the east, cut stone with elaborately-carved wooden banisters. Once above this high-ceilinged hall, the steps were also wooden. Windows overlooked the courtyard on all floors, even the hall. The outer walls had only blank stone until the third floor I had climbed to yesterday, where narrow archers’ windows breached the thick stone. Doors led into long-unused storerooms on the first two floors above the Great Hall, or unused warriors’ dormitories on the next three. Of Arnath or the wizard I saw no sign, nor of anyone else come to that.

Not until I climbed the penultimate flight of stairs, that is. Then box-carriers on their way down stood courteously aside to let me pass, fingertips touching their lowered foreheads in respect. These were local villagers, not slaves, clad in loincloths or short tu-

rics of homespun. I'd seen their rough sandals waiting at the outer doorway. Now I reached the level below the uppermost room and stood silently, listening. The carpenter exhorted one of his sons to be careful, did the young fool think that bronze hinge-pins were cheap as kindling? Eventually they, too, traipsed down the stairs carrying their tools, the father still grumbling at no fewer than four damaged pins that must be repaired or even melted down by the smith if he could not beat them straight himself. They did not see the silent watcher in the shadowed archers' passageway beyond. When the carpenter's voice faded down the stairs below, I climbed up to the top landing. The door stood half-open. Taking a breath, not deep enough to hurt my bruised ribs, I called out softly, "Master Ralvos?"

No reply. I pushed the door fully open. The room looked nothing like I had imagined. When had I last seen it? Three summers since I had bothered to climb all the way up to stand on the roof and declare myself emperor of the world? Four? Memory dredged up cobwebs at the ceiling beams and piles of dried bird shit crunching underfoot. Now servants had scrubbed the stone walls and wooden floor and ceiling spotlessly clean. More boxes and bags than I remembered seeing on the horses had been neatly stacked along the curved outer wall to the south. An oak trestle table and half a dozen ladder-back chairs had been carried in, four lounges with matching low tables for eating and drinking at leisure, an overlong bed-frame and a feather mattress with a clearly new cover. Unless I started to open boxes — and I most certainly was not going to do that! — there remained nothing to see. I turned back toward the doorway.

My nose rammed a wall of black cloth. Uh-oh. Fingers gripped my already-bruised shoulder hard enough to hurt and pushed me back a pace. The wizard, clad in a long ink-dark robe with some complicated symbol embroidered in silver on his left breast, smiled down at his uninvited guest.

Orm Shield us, I thought frantically, *he's even taller than my brother*. The graying hair on his narrow skull looked like it might brush the ceiling. His lips quirked in a smile that went no further up his face. "Good afternoon to you, young Prince."

"Ah ... Orm Shield you, Master Ralvos." I felt my shields shrink up into my belly at the thought of what Father would do to me for this latest trespass. Twice now I had met this man, twice he had trapped me where I had no business in being.

The hand turned me firmly back into the room. "In my land, we have a saying. It

goes, 'Boys and Cats.'"

"My Lord?"

"It means that boys are curious as cats and get themselves into the same sort of scrapes as a result." His laughter sounded low and silky and somehow mocking, just like his speech. He felt me tense even more beneath his hand. "Don't worry, my young princeling, I'll cause you none of yesterday's indignity. Then I thought you a spy. Sit, sit, my man has gone to fetch wine and cakes for my afternoon tea. Your father allows you wine?" He pushed me gently enough but irresistibly towards a couch. It caught the back of my knees, and I sat.

"This ShieldDay coming will mark my fourteenth summer. Yes, Master Ralvos, watered or with meals." Why was I so defensive? Folk in this valley deferred to me, my father ruled here. How should I respond to this man? "My Lord..."

"'Boys and Cats.'" He released my shoulder and held up his hand, palm toward me. "No more explanations, please. Curiosity sets us apart from the beasts, but we must learn to control and direct it, to use it with profit. Else it leads us astray. The priests get that much right. Put it here, Gafoth."

I jumped. The man made no more noise than his master, who walked quietly as the thistledown. The servant was stout and short where Ralvos was skeletally tall. Vast, scarred hands carried a fine silver tray. A livid canyon ran down his face from above the hairline to the jaw on the left side, narrowly missing his eye, and he walked with a limp that favored his right side though I could see no obviously disabling scar on that leg. A threadbare kilt reached mid-thigh, tied at one hip beneath an open vest of undyed cotton. A heavy bronze slave-chain clinked around one ankle, above cheap-looking rawhide-soled sandals, well-worn. His eyes, though, his strange eyes drew my own. They looked dull as a mud puddle and did not leap from point to point as would a normal man's. Instead, he stared straight ahead like a gargoyle carved of stone. He set the tray on the table between our two lounges.

"Half water?" The sorcerer's voice drew me back. I grew uncomfortably aware that I had been staring most rudely. Ralvos extended a goblet to me with a smile that touched only his mouth. The man he dismissed with a wave. Before the fellow had even left the room, he asked conversationally, "Perhaps you find Gafoth repulsive?"

I dodged the question, taking the wine from his outstretched hand and setting it

beside me on the table. “What ails him?”

“He was a murderer and a cutpurse, and one day he thought to work his arts upon me. Naturally I did not permit it. No, I did him no harm,” he added, seeing my look. “The limp and the various colorful scars about his person are mementos of his earlier days. But I was obliged to, let us say, to limit him. He does little without my express command, but that he obeys to the letter.”

I thought I could see Ralvos’ eyes measure me carefully, I could not tell for what. My bruised skin shivered despite the warm spring air as I remembered how he had frozen me in place the day before. “You exert great power over people, Master Ralvos.” Cook had refused me an apple turnover. Now I knew why. To break my frightened line of thought I took one still warm from the tray and bit into it. The pastry crunched deliciously between my teeth. I quickly caught a dribble of hot juice with my right hand before it landed in my lap.

“When you have lived as long as I, young Prince, you will realize just how easy it is to control people. They say they want to be free, but what they really want is security, to be directed. For someone else take the responsibility for their petty lives. A good ruler controls by force of his personality, a centurion by the strength of his right arm. Of course, people like to be *told* that they are free.” He sipped at his wine and paused to savor it properly. “Your father’s vintage is superb. It is the real treasure of this valley, not so?”

I nodded agreement and licked my palm clean of hot apple-juice, washed it down with the wine from my own goblet. Some craftsman had worked his silver in the form of a fat fish. A round, open mouth formed the rim, a flared tail the circular foot. I had rarely seen such artistry, and found it altogether beautiful. “We sell most of it to merchants from the south. The lake, the river that drains it, farms, a few villages. These make up my father’s holdings now.”

“Yet Trevigoth has not been entirely unhappy in this exile?” Ralvos half-asked, half-commented.

“I think he stopped caring whether he was prince or not when the Chariot came for Mother, twelve years ago.” I knew her only from the painting that hung in our formal dining room. Everyone told me how much I looked like her, but my mirror said mostly color of hair and eyes made for the resemblance. I had not even the vaguest memory of

her, otherwise. Even my nurse had left our service when I had six summers, departing the valley to live with a distant daughter before I had thought to ask her about the mother I didn't know. Sometimes Father stood before the painting saying nothing for long minutes, though only if he thought himself unobserved. "Lady Ylanna left here, um, three years gone. That's right, because I had ten summers then. Lady Jelarris has guested here since autumn a year ago, but I don't think he's going to marry her. I wish they would link the chains before Dalonna, though. I like her a lot even if she does sort of bother me about wearing dressy clothes and stuff even when it's summer. She makes him smile sometimes. But my brother will never forgive Father for losing the war and Haldêlor, for not fighting to the last man."

"You don't get along with your brother." Statement, not question.

"No." I intended to leave it at that, but the silence grew and grew. Before I realized I had broken it I heard myself say, "He'll have nineteen summers this ShieldDay, Orm's Midsummer Festival. Five more than me. Nobody ever shouts at him. He's big and strong and will no doubt become the famous warrior he dreams of being, should he ever leave the valley. May Orm put it into his head to leave soon."

Ralvos observed quietly, "A sapling in the shadow of a great tree cannot always grow its own way. Perhaps you will seek your fortune along other paths?"

"Oh, beyond doubt." I knew the fate of younger sons. Trust Arnath to make certain of that. "Father will betroth me to the ugly daughter of some minor baron in the hinterlands the day my voice breaks and I can sire children."

"You might choose to tread other roads." Ralvos tapped the silver of his goblet with a glossy fingernail to make it ring. He looked straight into my eyes. No, higher than my eyes. "You might even consider apprenticeship to a sorcerer such as myself."

Cold wine splashed down my bare belly. "What? You mean — become a magician?"

"There are certain advantages," he pointed out most reasonably. He lifted his chin toward me. "One does not get quite so bruised."

"I am training as a warrior." I mopped at white wine with the free end of my loin-cloth. The gauzy green silk did little but spread it around so that the air dried my skin quickly.

He inclined his head slightly, noncommittally. "Men have been both, ere now."

"The last warrior who was also sorcerer found himself carried off in Karkos' Char-

iot before his day was due.” I wondered at Ralvos’ purpose in this conversation. To apprentice me? Naturally I would have no say if Father agreed to such a thing, though I thought it unlikely he would. A prince’s son as a prentice? I had never heard of such a thing. Indeed, other than Vandarros himself, sorcerer before he became Emperor, I had never heard of any higher noble undertaking the study of magic. Nobles studied war and defense and the management of men and lands, little else. Though sometimes younger sons with no inheritance went into the clergy, that could hardly be accounted the same. And the other thing... “My Lord, what became of the Starsword when the Dark Lord carried off Vandarros to the UnderEarth?”

That earned me another humorless smile. “I think I shall not tell you that as yet. Later, perhaps. For now, let us say that others would also like to know.”

“Others like Arnath,” I said without pause for thought. “That’s why you got this tower instead of the guest suite in the villa.”

Half the smile vanished as he rose. “You are — perceptive — for one so young. Now the hour is already gone late afternoon, and I have much to do. However, my young friend, you must consider yourself always welcome here. Gafoth! Come close the shutters! You will excuse us? Much of what we do will be unsuitable for your innocent young eyes. Still, it is but spring, and I plan to guest here for some little time. Please come back freely as it suits you. Good day.”

I found myself standing outside, looking at the bronze-bound door from the landing. I shook my head to clear it of that last flood of words. One thought stood out from all the others. My brother Arnath certainly believed in that old Harpers’ legend, the Starsword.

The strange horses slowly mingling with our own in the west pasture belonged to Ralvos. They were clearly foreign: stolid, heavy beasts, at least two hands taller and vastly weightier than our warriors' nimble mounts. How could one fight from such a horse? Some years later I recalled this self-assured boyhood judgment when I found myself up against heavy armored cavalry for the first time, a meeting destined to revise somewhat my opinions on what makes a good war-horse.

In those springtime days of my life though, only one horse mattered. I stuck two fingers in my mouth and whistled shrilly. A black shadow split off from the herd and galloped toward me. My face split open in a huge smile at the sight, my run-in with the magician forgotten. Any objective judge would proclaim Sidarra the finest horse in the valley, maybe even in all Haldêlor. Arnath had grumbled mightily when Father negotiated to purchase her from the trader's string for my eleventh name-day present.

"That's no horse for a little boy," he had protested. "She'll make a proper warrior's mount. He'll kill himself inside a week on the likes of her."

"Just because you ride like a sack of cured hams, Arnath —"

Father had broken it up before Arnath could cuff me against the wall or I could kick my big brother in the shields. His voice had become uncertain of late, and my target of choice shifted accordingly. That one time our father sided with me instead of his elder son. Well, any fool could see the slaves might as well build my funeral pyre if the horse-trader departed with that black filly still in his string. "He needs a good horse, Arnath. He won't be a child forever, and the captain tells me your brother already rides as well as any man in the valley. You can't expect him to be on a pony all his life."

Clearly Arnath expected precisely that, but gold coins (not just silver!) changed hands, and the frisky night-black filly with white forehead star remained. Now she flashed past close enough that I felt the breeze of her passing on my bare right shoulder, stopped and reversed in the abrupt manner that Elath had taught horse and rider, then trotted up behind. I didn't turn around, that would have ruined her game. Hot breath and a velvet nose tickled the small of my back as she delicately pulled her carrot from next to the dagger sheath on my right hip.

Sometimes I still had to remind myself that she was truly mine. She'd been untrained, a baby not two years old when Father bought her for me, barely accustomed to saddle and bridle but boasting famous bloodlines on her dam's side and claiming Aleyini Midnight as the sire's. The trader swore that the breeding had been deliberate. Arnath always claimed some barbarian's mongrel mount had had his way with a half-decent mare. Whatever the truth — and I believed the trader and his documents with their testimonials and seals — she made my heart sing from that first day I laid eyes on her. Elath taught us as a team, and while he would never say so in my hearing, our captain reckoned cavalry skills as one part of my military education to count as an unqualified success.

She took the bit easily when I bridled her, following me to the rock I used to mount. Not small (unless compared to Ralvos' giants), Sidarra measured over sixteen hands. She was everything a warrior's horse should be, with a short back and long legs, wide-spaced eyes and high ears and flared nostrils to drink in the wind. No one could see her and doubt that claim of Aleyini Midnight blood. If I asked it of her, she would run with me on her back all the way to the great western ocean, where Kolldoi stables Her horses and the Sun-Chariot each evening.

I vaulted up and on and we cantered toward the closed gate. The serf who looked after the pasture moved aside with a conspiratorial grin. If he mentioned this to the stablemaster I'd hear about it for days: *Mustn't show the other horses that the fence won't hold them. Use the gate, Lord Hulvan. The open gate, if you please, or must I disturb your noble father's peace?* I didn't let it slow me down in the least. We soared over the gate with a span to spare, turned east toward the bridge. This time of year, as the snow melted from atop the mountains, water covered the fords too deeply and currents flowed too strongly to chance them. Hard bronze horseshoes banged *clackety clackety* on stone and then we were off the hard road and on the northeast trail toward the high meadows. A few hours in that direction would take me to Granny's, but I would need those self-same hours back as well. I had nothing for her, nor for the shepherd boys I would doubtless see along that route. *Tomorrow*, I promised silently. I rode amidst the vineyards for a while, careful not to damage vines as we alternately cantered and trotted. I greeted the peasants and serfs by name if we passed by close enough or with a broad wave if they were distant, working among the young grapes. Eventually we cut down to the lake side

and along the water's edge back toward the castle.

Kolldoi's Chariot still stood above the western rim of mountains as we walked the last mile to cool Sidarra down. I dismounted near my favorite diving place, a great outcropping of flat-topped stone thrust like a giant's finger into and over the lake. It lay just far enough from the castle to be an inconvenient hike for anyone not on horseback, so usually I had it to myself even though it was by far the best place to swim. The bank shelved quite slowly until the water came up to my chin, then dropped off sheer into the depths beneath my rock. Occasionally our younger warriors rode here or paused on their cross-country training runs for a more private swim than the lake afforded close by the castle, but today I saw no one else. Too bad. I enjoyed watching their horseplay, even joining in now I had grown big enough that even the newest guards no longer thought me fragile. Not that anything ever came of it. The differences in our births kept such play considerably more innocent than I might have desired.

Shrugging these fruitless thoughts away, I rubbed Sidarra down with handfuls of coarse dead winter-grass while she nibbled at the tender spring growth poking through. Elath's salve, the sun's warmth, and the exercise of riding had loosened the worst knots from my body. My horse seen to, I dropped loincloth and sheathed dagger onto the rock and ran the full length of the giant's finger to leap naked into crystalline water.

"*Whoo! Haaa! Cold!*" I came up shrieking. As spring turned to summer, the lake would warm. Right now it was pure melted snow, and felt it. My dagger shrank down to a wrinkled acorn and my shields tightened to mere buttons high between my legs. Half a walnut-shell could have served for my groin-guard. I swam hard to warm up. Kolldoi drove Her Chariot behind the western rim of mountains, the sky still azure with the valley's extended twilight. Eventually I climbed out and sprawled across my rock, totally exhausted for the second time in a single day. The flat granite held the heat of the sun, would still be warm halfway through the night.

Daylight gradually faded and the stars began to peek through curtains of high, thin cloud as I lay in that half-world between sleep and waking, daydreaming of nothing and everything. *Why*, a part of me wondered idly, *would a wizard like Ralvos be interested in a blade he could not use? Just to give it to Arnath? But who can understand anything that goes on in the mind of a magician?* On another level I knew the hour was advancing and that I should get back to the castle before someone missed me and worried.

Who? I wondered somewhat sourly. Even Father would assume I had eaten in the kitchen again. No doubt he would dust off his standard lecture about the social dangers of being too familiar with servants and slaves. The Gods know who else he thought I might associate with in this ensorcelled valley. Jelarris and Arnath would be quite happy in my absence, my brother for the usual reason and Father's lover because she would have his conversation virtually to herself. The priests wouldn't care. Well, no, Talithos might ask me where I had been, if he thought about it tomorrow.

For now I embraced the clean warm stone, too tired to care or even move. Better to lie still and make no more effort than breathing required. The sky above, when I finally rolled onto my back and opened my eyes again, had gone pitch-black between the stars. Far to the northeast, little Rholam showed His golden face above the horizon. I reached down to touch the charm dangling from my hip-chain, dropped my hand a finger-width lower to squeeze my dagger in a brief prayer-greeting to the God of boys, Messenger of the Gods, Mischief-maker. The flesh lay too limp with my fatigue for me to do more. At least my shields had released their death-grip between my legs as they warmed. Of the God's big, silvery sister Velanna I saw no sign. It wasn't all that late, then. This time of month, She would choose to rise with half of Her face veiled about three hours after sunset.

Abruptly I felt wide awake and cold all over. Sidarra shuffled in the dark, near the land end of the rock. Only the white of her forehead star and the barest glint of Rholam's gold in her eyes told me where she stood. Then some ancient reflex lifted the hair on the back of my neck, and my dagger shrank to near-nothing in my grip as my shields climbed right back inside my body. For the first time in my life, for no reason that I could discern, for nothing that the eye could even see, panic's icy fist gripped my belly.

Something was coming!

I rose slowly to all fours and edged off the granite outcropping to my feet, then soft-footed across the grass toward my horse. She quivered at my touch and pressed her head down against my chest. I patted her neck to reassure her, wishing for someone to reassure me. Preferably someone like a couple of decades of full-armored guards. I reached slowly for my dagger, the metal one. My hand encountered only the flat-linked silver of my chain and the sudden goose-flesh of a naked hip. The blade lay ten paces away, on the rock with my loincloth. Oh, Gods! I stroked Sidarra's cheek soothingly, now shiver-

ing myself as I debated going back for my weapon.

There!

The creature came out of the woods from the east. Ghostly white, it gleamed with some evil light of its own. If asked was it like a man, I might reply that it walked on two legs; but those legs were much too short and the body far too long and broad for any man. Arms like rock-pythons, so massive that they humped the back and bowed the shoulders, ended in talon-like fingers that nearly dragged the earth. The flattened head set too far forward and too low, as though the neck began in mid-chest — assuming it had anything so normal as a neck. A nightmare shambled across the clearing, misshapen head casting to and fro like a bloodhound worrying the air when it has lost the scent. Sidarra trembled even more violently but did not otherwise move. Her head dropped low and thrust hard against my chest, eyes closed. I could not stir. Fear tasted foul beyond words in my mouth.

The monstrosity reached the midpoint of the clearing and paused not twenty spans away. That travesty of a head swung to look in my direction. I might have screamed had not sheer terror locked the voice within my throat tighter than any spell Ralvos might cast. The eyes were pits of dead black, darker than the night between the stars — yet deep within glowed sparks of blood-red flame. Surely those twin fires flared as it looked at me and my horse. Fangs glittered wetly in the pale moonlight as its mouth gaped open. A serpent-like tongue flickered out as though to taste me even at this distance. I bit my own tongue until I tasted blood and prayed to Orm and Rholam that Sidarra would do no more than quiver. *Look away, you don't want me*, I prayed in fervent silence, *oh You Gods, turn it away from me!*

Only a fool would move and draw its attention, lift a hand to make a sign against evil or trace the Gods' symbols on the air. I could not help myself. Of its own accord my right hand rose to draw Rholam's Dagger between us and the creature. To my utter amazement a bar of golden fire traced my fingers' passage for just a pair of heartbeats, half-dazzling me in the dark! But in response the flaring fires died back in those deep-set eyes. Maw closed over questing tongue. Its frightful head swung away with a mildly bemused shake. After a few heartbeats' indecision looking off to one side from me, it turned and shambled towards the south, the direction of the river pass and principal exit from the valley.

Some time just short of forever passed before the thing shambled out of my sight among the trees. I dared to breathe again. A quick trip back along the rock retrieved my things. The dagger burned my flesh when I picked it up so that I dropped it and swore silently in surprise and pain. No, not burned, I realized as I shook my hand in the air, but *froze*. Wrapping the opposite ends of my loincloth around the wire-wound hilt and the leather sheath, I drew half a handspan of blade with a hard tug. Ice crystals glittered like diamonds on the bronze, visible even by Rholam's dim gold light. I pulled it completely free to clean the ice and damp off the metal. Then I sheathed the blade and lapped silk around and around both handle and sheath until none was left before I could hold the bundle without pain.

Fear must have cut my feeling while the monster was in sight, because now I also felt the cinch of ice about my hips where the flat silver links likewise dripped with cold. Oddly, the God's charm hanging beside my dagger and shields had not been affected. I tucked the silk-wrapped sheath carefully under my icy chain to secure it against my bare hip. Then Sidarra needed gentling all over again. Presently she let me mount, and we proceeded at a very cautious walk back to the castle. Her ears flicked nervously at every little night sound, and my eyes ached with trying to see through the dark and even through the trunks of the trees.

Two guards muttered idle gossip to one another in low voices before the open gates, the relieved warrior in no great hurry to return to quarters. Javelins *ting*-ed against shields in quiet salute when I rode my horse into their narrow circle of torchlight. Several windows in the villa flickered with candles or steadier lamplight. Atop the stubby tower at the northernmost corner of the villa, the shadowy figure of a scribe lifted an astrolabe to measure a wandering star for his astrology charts. It all looked so normal that I almost doubted I'd seen a thing. I desperately wanted to believe that the monster arose from a bad dream in a fatigued mind. Only my dagger and its hard leather sheath, wet with condensation right through the wrapped silk against my right hip, gave the lie to that. And one thing differed about the castle tonight.

The top room of the gate tower had been heavily shuttered. Strange red lights like the creature's eyes danced will-o'-the-wisp along every slight chink between wood and stone. *Why*, I wondered with ice in my belly to match the dagger against my hip, *had Ralvos summoned a demon? Would the monster have attacked me if I'd tried to flee?*

Certainly the creature had known I was there, both by sight and by that questing serpent's tongue. Whatever its intended prey, it had left me alone. It had prowled away from the castle when last I saw it. Where did it go, to what purpose? Had the wizard sent it to search out some enemy?

I suppressed another shudder and led Sidarra into the stable for the night. Three heavy stone lanterns, well secured against the risk of fire, gave enough light to see. Her stable-lad Karenndos had laid a horse-blanket down atop the clean straw of her stall to await our return. Elath selected the village boy as her groom when he began training Sidarra and me nearly three years ago. Despite my fearsome encounter with the supernatural, I felt my lips tilt upward at the sight of him. He had thrown his second blanket down in his sleep. Now his spear angled thickly from a sparse nest of dark curls across one leg, standing not quite upright. He counted two or three summers more than me, and it showed. Somebody had pleasant dreams tonight, anyway.

Then memory intruded most rudely with a shiver that ran the full length of my spine. I laid a second blanket across the youth against the growing chill of evening. Leaving Karenndos to his dream, I brushed Sidarra down myself in grateful silence. What point in telling anyone what I had seen? Who but Ralvos himself would believe such a fable? And it had passed me by, thank the Gods.

"Mmph. What — who..." Karenndos jumped to his feet, shedding the blanket. "My Lord! You should have wakened me. Let me do that?"

"She's my horse," I replied testily, holding the brush away from him. Then, somewhat ashamed of my reaction, I said, "I like to brush her. Anyway, you were having a dream. Everybody knows you shouldn't wake up dreamers; the silver cord might break and the spirit lose its way back to the body." I glanced down at him deliberately, grinned and raised my eyes back to his face. "Easy to tell what you dream about, too."

He blushed and put a hand in front of his still half-erect spear.

I slapped the back of his hand playfully with the comb I had been using on my horse's mane. "Don't be silly, you're no nakeder than I am. Who was it?"

"My Lord?"

I tapped him again with the comb. "Don't you lord me when I'm currying a horse same as any hostler. Come on, who was it? Tell me, Karenndos. Please? I want to know. One of the younger serving-girls from the castle's villa? A village girl? Maybe one of the

warriors?”

He turned slightly away to hide his spear, which had risen above horizontal and looked painfully hard. I could see it throb with his heartbeat. “No one special?”

“Uh-huh.” I dragged the comb down the back of his head, not enough to hurt as it tugged through his dark hair. “Come on, Karenndos, speak to me or I swear by Rholam I’ll comb your curls straight, and I don’t mean these on your head.”

“You won’t tell, Lord?” He turned back toward me, one hand gripping himself protectively.

I reached down to my own dagger, irresistibly upright against my belly in response to his man-sized spear. “I swear by Lord Rholam.”

He dropped his eyes to the straw-covered floor and replied in a whisper, “Captain Elath.”

I raised an eyebrow and returned to combining Sidarra’s mane. “You set your sights high.”

He sounded suddenly panic-stricken. “Please, my Lord, I meant no disrespect to the noble captain .”

“Karenndos, when you discover how to control the dreams Velanna sends us, you tell me your secret. Until then, I believe only the Mad Lady rules our night thoughts and dreaming pleasures — or our night fears.” *No. Gods, no. Dismiss that thought. It passed me by. I stand here safely in my father’s castle, surrounded by high stone walls and faithful guards.* I turned back toward him. “And now I think on it, Elath’s not nobly-born, you know. Professional warriors mostly aren’t. He once told me his father was an innkeeper or owned a shop or something like that.”

“Still high above a serf, Lord?” As with most of the serfs and freemen of this region, he turned half his statements into questions, as though constantly asking something of the Gods. Refusing to meet my eyes as he spoke, he ran his fingers through Sidarra’s tail as he absently felt for knots.

“Well, you never know.” I tossed him the comb. “Give her just a small measure of oats, will you please? We didn’t ride hard this afternoon.”

“I’ll see to it, Lord.” He dragged the comb down her tail, finding it to even his satisfaction.

I stopped at the stall door as a thought penetrated my own recurring fears.

“Karenndos, do you know any weapons?”

He looked around at me in surprise. “Weapons? Sling and spear, M’lord. I can’t throw a dagger like you?”

The entire castle must have been watching Ralvos’ boxes carried into the tower and my impromptu practice session with Lazirra. Better that than watching my father throw me out in disgrace the previous day, I suppose. “I’ve had a good teacher. Just a thought, that’s all. Sleep well. And I’m sorry I woke you. I hope your dream finishes properly this time.”

He grinned at me and cupped his shields in one hand, thumb hooked through the curls at the base of his spear. “I might help it along a little, I expect.”

I crossed the dew-damp cobblestones to the kitchen for warmth and companionship, not yet ready to face my dark and lonely room. Only three widely spaced torches burned to illumine the entire yard, and my shadow danced huge and monstrous across the cobbles. Still, I achieved the kitchen without seeing anything worse. The inside glowed with candles and oil lamps as people bustled about on the business of feeding the castle.

Chubby Hidarros was still up, or perhaps up again, yawning slightly and flour-white clear up to his elbows, smears across his face and belly. He helped me chase up a late dinner with barely a second glance at my bare state. We even enjoyed a couple of the apple turnovers left over from Ralvos’ tea, the pastry still crisp. Cook’s older son chattered about watching my training session with Elath, and did my bruises hurt as bad as they looked, and finally why did I have my loincloth wrapped around my dagger, never really bothering to stop and listen for any particular answers. Around us, subcooks and assistants kneaded dough for the morning’s baking. It all looked so normal I doubted what my own eyes had seen. Not for Cook and his kitchen folk, at least, the question of spells and magical swords and creatures out of nightmare.

But later I lay alone on my bed with not one but two tall new candles alight against the dark that pressed hard against my window. I gripped my shrinking dagger with both hands to pray fervently to Lord Rholam, boyhood’s Master and Protector, that His mad sister would send me no dreams in the night.

Dawn saw me outside the gates and across the moat, saddlebags hung behind me and a brace of javelins in their socket beside my left leg. I left word for Elath that my bruises had caught up with me, and I would train with him again tomorrow. It was simple truth, for I had awakened stiff and sore from head to foot. Rising from my bed had been a trial by torture in its own right. But Kolldoï guided Her Chariot slowly above the eastern peaks and across the sky-bowl as I rode into the high meadows. Her growing warmth conspired with Sidarra's easy stride to ease my kinks. Not that I felt totally healed; those bruises had really come into their own today. When it grew warm enough to peel off my tunic and tie it over the saddlebags, my flesh showed black and blue and yellow and green. Amazing that no skin had actually broken despite the blunt wooden swords and my leather practice armor.

The high meadows lay an hour above our uppermost vineyards, rich with new spring grass now. One of the shepherd's boys whistled piercingly and waved to me from a rocky outcropping, Keirolas or Keirvoss, I could not have told which even if he'd been standing at my side. I waved back and trotted over. "Hullo, Keir."

"Lord Hulvan." One fist tapped his chest in imitation of a warrior's salute, his grin a mix of milk-teeth and slowly-filling gaps. He dropped about four spans from his rock to the one beneath and bounced like a blown-up fish-bladder, landing on the only slightly softer earth three spans below. The twins climbed and jumped like veritable mountain goats. If I tried that stunt I'd break both legs. Four summers less than my thirteen rising fourteen, they looked like Dalonna had woven them entirely of shaggy black hair and rangy olive-tanned hide. His usual sheep-leather bag of carefully selected stones hung on a thong around his neck, the sling wrapped loosely around his waist and skinny hips. I had rarely seen them wear more until snow lay upon the ground, except perhaps woven crowns of dogwood or meadow-rose. But they bathed daily in the ice-cold mountain streams and smelled mostly of heather and buttercups.

"Where's your brother?"

A head-toss indicated a tiny valley beyond, one of many cleft into our encircling mountains. "In with Hound. Lots of lambs, one of us has to stay with 'em all the time?"

Plenty of wolves this last winter, too, might still be some about in the higher valleys.”

Wolves didn't much frighten me; they left Humans alone unless molested themselves. Even in the winter they wanted our sheep, not our shepherds. I twisted around to open a saddlebag. Loaves of still-warm bread released their seductive aroma. The shepherd's boy took one from my hand with easy thanks and no embarrassment at this generosity. I always brought something when I rode this way. But for my visits, they never ate oven-baked bread until they brought the flock to winter quarters outside the high village. The twins had been orphaned almost at birth. The old shepherd who was also my family's serf treated them like his own grandchildren, but I had felt some personal responsibility since I first rode my pony up this way five years ago. Frequently I wished that Dalonna had given me younger brothers instead of my older one, or at least in addition to. It might have been thus had Mother not died of the plague during my second summer, or if Father had ever remarried.

We two sat in the shade for half an hour, talking of nothing important. With some reluctance I begged off the younger boy's invitation to swim and wrestle by pleading my all-too-obvious bruises. Even the gentlest of Rholam's Games would be too painful for the moment, and the twins didn't know how to do anything easy. I promised for my next visit to teach Keir and his brother the latest throw I had learned from Lazirra, and casually, as I prepared to mount, asked if they had seen any unusual beasts or tracks recently. The boy looked up at me from under bushy black brows. “Sironn says it was a dream.”

I stopped cold. “What was?”

“Keirvoss was on early watch night before last,” he answered obliquely. “Woke me up, something making the flock restive maybe half an hour after sunset? We saw it, big and white and ugly, but it was a distance off. Going downhill. Saw its tracks, too, like — like a man's, almost, but too long and sort of wolf-claws at the end of the toes?”

I felt my blood run cold. “Show me?”

He tossed his head back. “Naw. Can't. 'Sall stirred up, now. Sheep've fed there. Keirvoss and me, you know how we dream together, oftentimes? But he wasn't sleeping, Rholam hear me speak truth, he woke me up, Hulvan. Don't care what Sironn says, this wasn't no dreaming? And that track, we saw what we saw.”

“I don't think it was a dream, Keirolas,” I said, remembering all too clearly the dead-

white skin and fire-in-black eyes. Sironn might be a good shepherd but the old serf lacked imagination. “You be careful up here; I don’t want to lose you.”

He grinned and unwound his sling, longer than he was tall. A stream-tumbled stone from his bag slipped into the fold of the pouch. “See that wood-dove up there?”

“Don’t kill the bird unless you’re going to eat it,” I commanded without thought.

“Not the bird; branch she’s sitting on.” The limb, as thick as two fingers, exploded a fingerwidth to the dove’s left. The broken branch fell a span before the startled bird could release it and fly indignantly away. “Got us some new wolf fur for cloaks, Keirvoss and me did. Killed three?”

“Where was Sironn?” I had not heard this tale before.

He wound the sling loosely around his hips again. “Around. Bow-shot the ones we slinged, he did. Shot ‘nother two without us? Not that we couldn’t’ve killed ‘em by ourselves ‘thout him. This winter past we lost ‘bout a dozen sheep to that pack, all told. Fair trade, wolf fur cures nice and keeps the winter-wet off even better’n wool.”

“All the same, you be careful.”

“Sure. Rholam looks after the likes of us.” He reached down and gripped his dagger for luck and protection at the mention of the God’s name. I did likewise through the thin blue silk of my loincloth. “Orm Shield you, Lord.” He made a stirrup of his hands to boost me onto my horse.

“Rholam smile on you, Keirolas. I’ll ride by again in a few days.” I turned Sidarra’s head and resumed my journey.

The deer trail wound upwards through the trees. Perhaps the twins knew where it led, perhaps not. They never brought their sheep and lambs into these upper forests where the forage was poor for any but deer and mountain goats. The wizard Zaldunnthé had been very well paid for his spells, and the magic indisputably worked. From my father Prince Trevigoth and my brother Arnath down to the guardsmen, servants, villagers, serfs, slaves — if they belonged to the valley, toiled for us or merely lived under my father’s rule on these remnants of our lands, they could not leave. A daughter might depart to marry, indeed could return with her children on a visit if she had not taken Barros’ coin to spy on us. A free son might leave for good and all, or a retiring or dismissed guardsman. The soaring mountain walls guaranteed our safety; but those between them lived as prisoners.

Another half-hour's ride upward through forest and clearings brought us to a tiny concealed pass running northeast. Exploring with the new freedom of a full-sized horse between my thighs late last summer, I had discovered I could use this exit without let or hindrance. I had never tried to ride outside my narrow world along the main road to the south, nor the high road to the north and further west. For all I knew, anyone could come and go by this place. *Did Zaldunnthé miss it in his spell-casting?* I had wondered, but could think of no proof that would not reveal my secret.

Sidarra picked her way through the narrow defile. Stunted, storm-twisted conifers scraped us on either side. I gave the mare her head and crossed one leg over in front of her saddle to slouch comfortably as the path led toward the lower valley on the other side. Presently I straightened up and filled my lungs, singing a snatch of some Harper's ballad. The air seemed somehow better for it, this side of the pass. We never heard the more famous Harpers, of course. Our valley did not lie on the major trade routes nor were we famous but for our superior wines. Still, those who found their way to the castle always praised my voice, with the warning I would not keep it — unless I entered Lord Rholam's service, as had no few of them. I had no great interest in drinking Rholam's Draught to avoid losing my boy's voice, holy gift of the God or no, but I happily took every lesson the Harpers offered in singing and playing the lyre and lute. From other boys around the castle I knew that some of them would also teach the byways of other pleasures, but none had yet risked a prince's possible ire. Ah, well. They did at least instruct me in both the making of music and its enjoyment. Since my youngest days I had known that men will flatter the son of even a very minor prince; but not even Arnath ever accused me of sounding like a raven.

Sidarra knew her way, and before I could sing more than a couple of dozen verses of *Weldrim's Vengeance* the deer-path became a wider goat-trail that led us to the witch's cottage. I slid to the ground thirty paces away from the huge oak that sheltered it. "Halloo! Granny! Granny Nulaa, it's Hulvan!"

The cottage had been built right around the trunk of the ancient tree, looking as though it sprouted there as naturally as bark or limbs. It grew from sod and timber, saving the mud-mortared stone chimneys that rose above the branches at north and south. The face that waited in the shadowed doorway as I led Sidarra forward wasn't Granny's, though. Her girl, Allatha, watched me with an owl's gaze. Karkos could carry off that one

any time He wanted her, I reckoned. This was not the traditional antipathy between boys and girls playing in our villages or about the castle. This one made me genuinely uneasy. Allatha counted two or three summers more than me. Black-haired and olive-skinned like the twins and most of our serfs or village-folk, she looked halfway through me from enormous dark eyes. Any man with half an eye would count her pretty and more. I mostly gave it no thought. As girls that age tended to, she stood taller than me by a handspan or so. I had no idea if she claimed any blood relation to the old witch. Witch-let in training, she clearly was. Witches ought to be old gray hags like Granny or Mother Pilia who lived at the forest-edge of Muln, not smooth-skinned girls who watch with big, black eyes and laugh scornfully, all superior, when they think a boy foolish. And this one laughed a lot.

But today her nodded greeting seemed friendly enough as I unlaced the bags and loosed Sidarra's saddle girth. "Have you brought wine?"

I nodded in return. "Yes. Three flasks, and a flask of winter-wine, too. And a ripe cheese. And soft bread and rolls. How is she?"

"Better, thanks." She helped me with my load, shouldering the saddlebags. It hitched her shift of thin yellow linen up a bit, showing more thigh. I looked away, slightly embarrassed. Little girls still attending Velanna's Chapel often went bare as their brothers in the summer's warmth. Not so those who already worshipped at Dalonna's shrine. While I knew that this girl, like her granny, worshipped at other altars than ours, it made no odds. So long as I sacrificed to Lord Rholam, neither little girls nor their older sisters were for me. A few steps closer to the house she continued, "Up and about more, now winter's finally over. Her bones are old, they feel the cold. Did your father beat you?"

"No," I replied tersely. I didn't much like winter and cold weather and having to wear heavy clothes all the time, but at least my bruises would have been covered. This time of year everybody under Kolldoi's Chariot could see my disgrace.

She shrugged and moved aside for me to enter. The sprawling hut always contained the most wonderful smell of herbs and flowers, even in midwinter. Nulaa sat at her table of ancient oak — all the wood in the place was either oak or ash or yew, never any pine or cherry or cypress — mixing something and muttering over it. When she had finished, she looked up to see me sitting opposite her and Allatha pouring wine into three well-

scoured oaken goblets. “Voda bless me, it’s Hulvan. We’ve not seen you in an age, lad. Be welcome. And the Goddess’ blessings on you, you’ve brought Granny a gift.”

“More than one, Gran.” With the wine poured Allatha opened my saddlebag and put the cheese and one of the loaves on the table. She sliced parchment-thin slivers for the old woman with an ancient knife that looked sharp enough to cut the very air.

Nulaa nodded her thanks. “He’s a good boy. But you’ve hurt yourself. Need a salve for it? No, you’re healing nicely already. Used one, I see. Pilia’s, was it? She’s an old fake, that one, but she knows something of herbs. Wouldn’t trust her with an open wound. Bruises, certainly. You’ve been fighting again. Boys!”

I laughed at the accuracy of her thrust and held up my hands palms-forward in mock protest. “Training, Granny, please, it’s training. I must have a trade; you know my older brother will inherit the vineyards.” I had told a tale of being a vintner’s son, that previous summer when I first discovered this place. It was truth, if not exactly the complete truth.

“And little boys grow into big boys, and all boys dream of being famous warriors, mmm? I know, I know, I helped my daughters and granddaughters raise their little helions, and not a one that didn’t fancy himself a warrior out of legend.” She smiled and reached across to pat my hand. “Still, Voda loves and blesses you, lad. There’s not many as come to see Granny these many years without asking her for something. Potions, cures, vermin-bane, love-charms — not that this one will need love-charms to turn the heads of women’s daughters when his time comes upon him in a year or three, will he, lass? A pretty lad is our Hulvan. Blushes right nicely, too.” She cackled merrily at the scarlet evidence of my embarrassment. Allatha smiled through me at the far wall but for once held her laughter.

Still, I enjoyed the old woman’s sharp wit even when I was at the receiving end. She paid me no assumed courtesy for my father’s title. She didn’t know. She was one of the few people, like Lazirra and Elath and the twins, that I felt reasonably certain liked me for myself. At least, like them, she gave me no false and fawning respect.

When I eventually rose to take my leave, she leaned across the table and stopped me with a hand upon my wrist. Old bones showed clearly through her age-freckled skin. “Hulvan. Wait. There is — a smell about you.”

Horse, I almost replied frivolously. That wasn’t what she meant, though, and I bit

that answer back sharply. “I don’t understand, Granny.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Oh yes. A smell. One I know well. Magic, close by.”

Now how in Karkos’ Dread Name — did she know something about last night’s monstrous vision? Dare I even ask? I offered cautiously, “A magician guests in my father’s house these last three days.”

She nodded sagely. “Your family has considerable wealth, anyone with but a single eye can see that. So he won’t offer to buy you outright. Not even bronze coins or ingots to the parents and education and upbringing promised to you as he would tempt a villager to part with her child. Most probably he’ll offer a formal apprenticeship.”

I felt my own eyes grow wide, hearing this uncanny assessment. “Granny, how do you...”

“Time, boy, time. Voda gifts some of us with time to learn these things. Already spoken, hasn’t he? Not surprising. It’s there for the world to see.” She looked at me sharply when I did not understand. “Your *hair*, lad.”

I put hand to head, half-expecting to feel serpents sprouting. “My hair?”

“What color is your sorcerer’s?” she demanded.

I frowned. “Well, gray, mostly. Black once.”

“Then he has made soul-pact with one of the Powers. You needn’t, if you walk that path. Your hair, boy!” Nulaa shook her own gray head at my obtuseness. “Oh, Allatha, explain it to him, please.”

The girl looked at me solemnly. “Your hair is ruddy copper mixed with gold, Hulvan. We servants of the Great Goddess, we make our soul-pacts with Voda All-Mother. I may not tell you or any other man of our ceremonies, but know our souls are pledged to Her. Sorcerers make their contracts for Power with Others, the High Servants of Him you call Karkos, mostly? Sometimes they will deal with darker entities, like the minions of the demon Grosha.” Her left hand described a complex symbol in the air. For half a dozen heartbeats I saw a smoky green and brown web hang in the air before her, then nothing. I felt something, too, like a fine stream of water across the hair on the back of my neck, like and yet unlike the fearful stir the night-creature had caused. If she noticed my reaction she passed over it. “These things we do for knowledge of the unseen and to gain true Power? But red hair, even red-blond like yours, ah, that we call the Goddess’ Kiss. Such as you may walk our path without paying our price.”

I pulled a curl from my forehead to my line of vision. Granny nodded. “The sign of Power as birthright. The Goddess’ Own Kiss, placed upon you before you left the UnderEarth for your mother’s womb.” She tugged at my wrist, and I leaned toward her. One trembling hand brushed my hair lightly, and her wrinkled lips touched there, too. When I searched my memory, she had always tilted my head forward to kiss me on the hair and not on the forehead or cheek. I had never thought about it before now. “Goddess guide you, Hulvan. And fare you well, today and throughout your life.”

Allatha brought out my saddlebags with the empty ceramic wine-flasks from my previous visit. She watched in silence as I tightened the saddle-girth and slung the bags. When I mounted with the aid of a tree-stump some distance from the ancient oak, she took hold of Sidarra’s bridle to make us pause. I swallowed a warning. The battle-trained mare would allow no one but me or Karenndos or Elath to approach thus; yet this girl held her without thought and without apparent danger. I felt horseflesh quiver slightly between my bare thighs. “Hulvan? She tells me that Voda will call her soon.”

“Huh?” These folk worshipped in the Old Path, forbidden in many places though not in Haldêlor nor our neighboring lands. “You mean she — she thinks she’s going to die?”

“Not thinks. Knows. Die?” She shrugged. “It’s less than that, or more. Hulvan, I may have to leave this place. The old ways are not so well regarded here? Many folk in the nearby hamlets fear her more than love her. They bear neither fear nor love for me. Would I be safe beyond those hills, on your father’s land? Just for a short time?”

I had so many more possessions than these folks, things I never used or even thought of. When had this girl ever asked me for anything, even a kind word? I looked down into unblinking owl’s eyes. “I — Yes. You would be safe there. Safe and welcome. By Rholam’s Dagger and by Orm’s Spear I swear it.”

She stroked the horse’s nose with her free hand and released the bridle. Sidarra’s skin shuddered as though casting off a troublesome fly. With much to think on, I rode slowly for home.

Captain Elath walked yawning down the stairs from the barracks above the stables at first light. He raised one eyebrow quizzically when he found me already waiting in my leather practice armor with my crested helm under my right arm. But he said nothing, merely nodded a good morning. We hiked across the moat bridge to the practice field in the pale and shadowless dawn twilight. The air was calm if a little chilly — perfect for our workout, which would have me sweating like a racehorse by the time Kolldoi showed Herself. Within our surrounding mountains, sunrise always came later and sunset earlier than outside, I had been told. Our twilights lasted much longer, though. Thinking about a miles-away horizon unbounded by jagged peaks made my stomach feel a little odd, and I rarely dwelt on it.

The dew brushed off the grass and chilled my sandaled feet a little as we walked, not enough to bother me. Still without words, we squared off with the practice swords held out reversed and vertical, points down and hilts up, and bowed to one another. We flipped our swords up to normal grip as we stepped back into ready stance, and began. Three minutes into our workout Elath held up a hand for me to stop. “Better. Much better. Orm be praised you aren’t trying to fight like two days gone.”

“Huh. You didn’t leave me enough unbruised hide left for that.” The evidence showed clearly on my bare flesh between wrist bracers and upper arm-guards and again below the leather strips of my kilt.

He snorted. “Quite. Let’s practice counters this morning since you seem to have found your wits again.”

He demonstrated what he meant. Rather than parrying a blow or thrust his sword seemed to enwrap mine and turn it aside while still landing point-first over my heart without so much as a pause. Not, I should add, hard enough to bruise me again through leather breastplate and padded linen undertunic. We had about a half-hour of privacy for Elath to illustrate a new technique and wait for me to copy his fluid moves, or at least try. Then our audience began to assemble. First Enorath and Dalanni straggled up the hill arm in arm and giggling at some private joke, followed a couple of minutes later by Syarin and Hidarros, the older boy munching on something from the kitchen. Younger

boys straggled in over the rest of the hour, finally joined by Talithos himself. The priest greeted us politely as he sat to watch from a short distance off.

At the hour mark, more or less, Elath called a break. Some in the group of boys snickered and then a treble voice said aloud, “You’re dancing instead of fighting this morning!”

I turned and glared at them, right hand on my hip and practice sword angled down but not touching the earth. Never wound Mother Earth with the point of a sword. “You want my bruises, kid, you’re welcome to them.”

“Enough,” the captain said mildly. “You boy, Enorath, put that silly branch down.”

The lad dropped his pretend-sword as though it had burst into flames, his face and shoulders and chest suddenly scarlet. So did Dalanni, his erstwhile opponent. “Yes, Lord Captain.”

“Come here. Right here, dammit, I don’t bite.” Like me, he stood with his sword held low but point clear of the ground as Enorath obeyed. “Hmm. How many summers have you, boy?”

“T- Twelve this ShieldDay coming, Lord Captain,” Enorath stammered.

“If you’re going to fence, then as Orm loves us do it properly. Give him your blade, Hulvan. You can sit and rest for a while.”

I handed over my practice sword, surprised at this break from routine. When I unstrapped my helm, Syarin appeared beside me to hold it on his lap before I could set it down. He brushed the dark blue horsehair crest against his cheek, smiling at the soft-tickly touch. His brother plunked down heavily to earth on my other side, asking, “Is he going to thrash Enorath like he did you? That was Harthin who was cheeky, not him.”

“I don’t think so. Shh, let’s watch.”

Enorath stood clumsily with the unaccustomed blade weighting down his right arm. At the captain’s urging he lifted the point to guard — and Elath swatted it right out of his hand with a casual blow. “Both hands, boy. That’s a hand-and-a-half sword, what some call a bastard. Handier than a barbarian’s two-handed pig-sticker but with more weight than some city fop’s shortsword. Serious warrior’s weapon. A grown man with a trained wrist can use it one-handed for many techniques, but not you. Not yet. Right hand firm on the hilt but not tense, left hand looser on the lower hilt to guide. Pick it up.” He knocked it from the boy’s hands again. Enorath said *ouch* without a sound and

thrust his hands under his armpits. I knew how he felt. So did the captain. “Stings, does it? Firm but not tense, I said. Again.”

For the next half-hour he drilled the boy on basics, and I mean basics, the sort of thing that I had absorbed virtually without thought, growing up surrounded by warriors who constantly honed their own skills. Enorath persevered, concentrating admirably on what the captain said and never once looking towards his audience however much the other boys might snicker and catcall.

“Enough for your first day,” Elath declared, taking the sword from trembling fingers. He turned toward the priest and asked respectfully, “Father, as you’re allowing the boys time to watch, may I assume you don’t mind this one joining in?”

Talithos smiled angelically. “So long as you leave him whole enough for his lessons in the chapel, Captain. My Lord the God requires only his fingers and tongue and eyes intact. The rest of him is entirely yours to use as you will. In any case I shall doubtless lose that one the moment he reaches his twelfth summer this coming ShieldDay.”

“Oh, he’ll be fit enough to sit for lessons until then.” Elath turned back to the boy and slid his wooden blade up between bare legs to tap him gently. Give him credit, Enorath didn’t step back, although his shields flinched visibly halfway back into his groin at the threatening touch. “Come to me this afternoon in my quarters. You don’t need practice armor for a while yet, but we’ll get you a cup to wear under your loincloth — and you won’t forget to wear a cup and loincloth to practice every morning, not unless you plan to join Father Talithos in his life-long service to Lord Rholam.”

“Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. I mean I’ll come this afternoon after lunch.” Enorath fairly glowed.

The captain snorted a sound that could have meant anything. “Hulvan? Your turn again.”

Shortly afterwards Talithos gathered the boys up and led them back to the castle for their morning lessons. Elath and I hardly noticed. One part of my mind not associated with keeping my skin intact today considered the captain’s acceptance of his son for training, always assuming castle rumor to be true. Now seemed as good a time as any. When we finished and began walking slowly back toward the castle and much-needed baths, I asked, “Are you planning to have Enorath join us in the morning sessions from now on?”

He nodded. "If you don't mind, M'lord. The lad is old and large enough now."

"I don't mind. Takes some of the pressure off me."

"You think that, do you?" he asked dryly.

I laughed quietly. "Not really, M'lord Captain. I've known you too long. But ... if I might beg a favor?"

"Am I going to regret this?" He stopped at the moat bridge, looking down at me.

"I think not, sir, though I suppose *I* might. May I bring another along for training?"

He tilted his head to one side, mentally viewing the boys of the castle and nearest villages. "Hidarros is already apprenticed to the kitchens and hardly warrior material anyway. Byanni left this spring to learn a forester's trade with his father after cutting his hair on Lord Rholam's altar. The others are all at least two summers younger than Enorath. Who are you thinking of?"

"Sidarra's groom, Karenndos." Before he could say no, I hurried on. "He's at least a couple of summers older than me and he's never handled a sword, I know, but he says he can use a spear, so he should pick up javelin quickly enough. I thought — I thought it might be a good idea if my groom could defend himself and my horse should I need to fight afoot."

Rather to my surprise he did not dismiss the request out of hand. "Hmm. Not a bad idea, that. You know, I've heard that in the northern kingdoms, mounted warriors of noble blood take on young boys as squires, train them as warriors in return for service. He's older than you but the principle is much the same." He nodded slowly. "Your responsibility, though, Hulvan. He's your groom, and your father's serf."

"My responsibility, Captain." Gods, that sounded grown-up, and I hadn't even shorn my hair yet. *Responsibility*. Frightening word.

After a quick bath to spare my still-sore hide and an entirely too late breakfast in the kitchen, I crossed the cobblestoned courtyard to the stables. Karenndos saw me coming and hurried forward to Sidarra's stall. He had her bridled by the time I reached them, but I held up a hand to stop him from putting the saddle on her. "Can you ride?" I asked. It seemed a foolish question, but he was a serf and might never have had the opportunity to learn. Certainly I had never seen him on a horse.

He nodded. "All the grooms can ride, Lord. When we take the horses to the higher pastures and back, we have to."

“Good. Tell the stablemaster you’ll be gone for a while. Bridle another horse and come with me.” I took Sidarra’s reins from his hand and led her into the sunlit courtyard. When he appeared leading an elderly chestnut gelding, I handed the reins back to him. “Stay here a minute.” It took half that to dash up the stairs to the armory and fetch three light javelins. I bound them into a bundle with a bit of twine and returned to the horses waiting at the mounting block. “Ready? Let’s go.”

I led the way at a gentle canter, watching to see that he did not fall. His seat wasn’t brilliant, but I’d known warriors to take service with us who could ride no better. I did not propose to make a cavalryman of him anyway. We walked the horses the last few minutes to our destination, my diving rock. I gestured Karenndos to wait by the lake while I rode up the path a ways further. It was broad daylight and I found nothing there, of course. Of course.

We hobbled the horses and left them to graze on the tender spring grass. “All right,” I said, untying my javelins, “you said you used a spear before?”

“Yes, Lord.” He eyed the javelins somewhat uneasily as I drove them butt-first into the soft earth. I paced a distance to an oak tree and pinned a broad leaf to the bark in the center of its trunk with a broken-off twig, about heart-high. Bright spring green shone against weathered brown. It would serve.

“All right,” I said when I had returned to the javelins. I yanked one free of the grass and held it out to him. “That’s our target. Show me.”

“Lord Hulvan, our village spears have fire-hardened wood or maybe chipped flint heads, not bronze. Bronze. Gods!” His voice cracked a little. No serf could even dream of owning metal. He lifted one, finding the balance. Another look in my direction finally convinced him I meant it. “If you say so, M’lord.” He cast.

Give him credit, he didn’t miss the tree by all that much.

I picked up one of the remaining two, hefted it in my left hand and threw it, had the next in the air before the first had pinned the leaf. The second thudded into the mark half a finger’s width from the first. “Close your mouth, Karenndos, the flies will get in. Even Elath admits I’m good at this. I’ve been training since I was little.”

“My Lord, I — I mean I didn’t...” His voice trailed off as he stared at the ground. Finally he lifted his eyes to mine and asked, “Why, Lord?”

“Why what?”

His hand described an uncertain circle, more or less encompassing the valley. “Why have you brought me here? Your father rules this land, and I am your family’s serf. Whatever you command, you know that will I do, Gods permitting. But why this?”

I shrugged and gestured him to follow me to the tree (and beyond) to retrieve the javelins. “A warrior doesn’t always fight from his horse. Could be I want my groom to be able to defend her and himself if the enemy cuts me off.”

“But, Lord, just a spear against armored warriors...”

He might not be educated, my groom, but he was far from stupid. “Just so. A spear alone is not enough. Tomorrow morning you’ll join me on the practice field with Captain Elath.”

If he flushed the shadows of the woods hid it as he searched for the lost javelin. “Lord, I will make a fool of myself.”

“Indeed you will,” I agreed cheerfully. “In front of a dozen little boys and a priest of Rholam, too. You won’t be the only one, though, Enorath started training this morning.”

“The captain’s son?” He came out of the woods with the missing javelin.

“So I’ve heard it told.” I grinned at him most evilly. “The captain’s dream-lover and the captain’s son training together. Well, at least you won’t get pregnant and give him another. Come on, I want to see you hit that tree before we’re done.”

He did, too. Consistently, once he got the balance and feel of the javelins. Finally I gestured for him to stop. I bound the javelins again as I walked toward my diving rock, my groom two steps back. “Next question,” I said, “Can you swim?”

This time he looked down at the grass beneath his bare feet, oversized as his hands and his spear, his body still growing into them. “No, Lord.”

“So what will you do if you fall off your horse fording a river?” I asked with mock severity. “Drown and cost me a groom and guard all at the same time?”

“Very likely, my Lord,” he replied, dead serious.

I leaned the javelins against the rock and untied my loincloth, indicated that he should do the same. He stood only a hand’s width taller than me, but his spear possessed an enviable length and thickness even soft. “The water here is shallow enough to stand until you’re about four spans out, and then it drops straight off. Don’t drown while I’m teaching you to swim, Karenndos; I’d be quite annoyed.”

He looked around to see if I were serious or not and finally assayed a smile which I

returned.

We waded into the chill water slowly, the heat from our javelin exercise holding the cold at bay. Swimming, like riding or walking or holding a blade, was not a skill I could actually remember acquiring. It was just something I did. Still, we managed well enough that afternoon. He trusted me completely, which surprised me somewhat, stretching out in the water atop my supporting arms to practice first the kick and then the arm stroke of basic swimming. Time enough to teach him the overarm stroke later; for now I just wanted him not to drown.

Eventually I left him to practice on his own, trying to coordinate arms and legs while staying close to the bank. On my own I swam further out to dive deep under the clear water. It occurred to me that perhaps Syarin and Hidarros and Enorath might also like to swim out here with me, if I could prise them free of any afternoon chores they might have.

Karenndos waited for me on the rock, having discovered its warmth. He stood up respectfully when I waded ashore, sat again at my impatient gesture. “Remember what I said last night?”

He frowned. “My Lord?”

“Yes, just exactly that. Don’t lord me every second breath. It’s one thing when we’re in the castle and there are other servants and warriors around. As Talithos says, one must maintain the social proprieties. But do you think the Gods care a fig for our Human titles?”

That earned a real frown and not just a thoughtful one. “But they must, Lord Hulvan. The priests say that the Gods ordained our lot, set princes above barons above free-men and serfs and slaves?”

“And if you’re virtuous in this life you’ll be rewarded in the next after Lord Karkos gives your chastised soul to Lady Dalonna for rebirth. Yes, Karenndos, I’ve had enough theology pounded into me. But I’m not convinced that the Gods care about earthly titles and position so much as how we live our lives and treat one another. Talithos taught me that, and he’s a priest.” I stretched out in the warm sunlight to let Kolldoi’s Chariot dry me and drain some of the stiffness and pain from my bruises.

Karenndos sat beside me, his face still worried as he thought new thoughts. “I don’t know Lord Talithos, I had already shorn my hair at the village shrine before the noble

captain chose me to be your groom.”

“You really should.” I closed my eyes to let the afternoon sun bake my eyelids. They weren’t bruised, at least, but it felt restful. “You’re already a man so you can’t go into the Chapel of Rholam, but he doesn’t exactly live all his life in there. Go talk to him.”

“As you command, Lord.”

I sighed without sound. Born a serf, raised a serf, think like a serf. Then again, I had unthinkingly made it a command. Perhaps Talithos could help, perhaps not. I had no idea what Selarrin thought on this issue; he might be entirely traditional and preach thoughtless submission to one’s betters. A lot of priests did, I knew. They liked their comfortable position as arbiters of the Gods’ wills. Not being a priest myself, I didn’t know what the Gods might think of that. The circularity of that line of thought confused me, and I abandoned it.

When Kolldoï touched the western peaks I rose, stretched my bruises carefully and nudged Karenndos awake with a gentle toe. Deciding not to swim again, I tied on my loincloth and slipped my sheathed dagger absently against my left hip. Stopped, scowled at nobody, and shifted it to the right. We rounded up our hobbled horses, collected the bound javelins, and rode back towards the castle. Not for all the gold in all the Dwarven mines under all the mountains of the world would I remain out there after dark.

For the third day running I rose well before dawn, this time heading first to the stables. Karenndos was already awake and sweeping out Sidarra's empty stall. The grooms had moved all the horses except a mare nearing her time out to a nearby paddock. He bowed when I called to him and looked apprehensively at my leather and bronze practice armor but followed me out to the field.

Rather to my surprise Syarin had beaten us both. He swung from the lowest limb of an ancient sprawling oak, toes a full span from the ground. "Lord Hulvan!" he shouted without turning loose. "Watch me!" One leg snaked up between his arms and hooked over the branch as he rocked his now upside down body back and forth. Then he swung his free leg down hard and flipped himself upright, straddling the limb.

I applauded. After a couple of heartbeats so did Karenndos. "That's good. Who taught you?"

"Talithos told me how he practically lived in a tree when he was a kid, how they used to swing on the branches. But this morning was the first time I tried it?" His bare skin bore a faint sheen despite the dew and the cool of the spring morning. He must have been up that tree since before first light. Now he swung both his legs back and leaned forward so his navel lay across the limb, flipped forward, pulled up short as he swung down and backwards and up again past the horizontal, paused at the outside of his swing, then released the limb and dropped to his feet. The effect was only mildly spoiled as he lost his balance and staggered backwards to sit down hard on the grass. "Ow! It worked last time."

"More practice," I suggested. The thought of trying that trick of swinging up onto the branch almost had me in the tree myself, but not wearing this heavy armor.

"Where's your brother?"

"He's coming." Syarin stood to brush the damp off his grass-stained butt and align his charm of Rholam beside his dagger and shields without thought. "Got a surprise for you this morning, M'lord."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? What's that?"

"If I tell you, it won't be a surprise, will it?" He looked past us and tapped a fist to

his breastbone in imitation of a warrior's salute. "Orm shield you, Captain Elath," he called out loudly.

"And guard your left," the captain's voice rumbled from some distance behind us. Enorath trailed him, clearly uncomfortable in a loincloth tied over a padded bronze cup that made him look more adult than he was. The charm of Rholam that hung from his waist thong belied the outsized bulge in his tight-tied garment, just as did mine beneath the thick leather strips of my kilt. A wooden sword somewhat smaller and lighter than mine swung from one hand. It looked like the one I had used until two years ago. The captain nodded in my direction and raised his practice sword in salute as they neared. "Orm shield you, Hulvan. And you, Karenndos."

"Lord Captain." Karenndos dropped to one knee in a deep bow.

I kicked him lightly in the ribs with my sandaled toes. "Not here."

"But —"

"Stand up. You bow in the castle," I said firmly. "Not here, except a warrior's standing bow between equals or student to master before you cross swords and after. Otherwise you salute the captain, same as me. If you don't have a sword in your hand, it's like this." I clenched my right fist and tapped my leather-covered breastbone. "Orm shield you, Captain." Looked over at Karenndos.

Who swallowed and imitated me, hitting himself hard enough that I could hear fist on flesh. "Orm — Orm shield you, Lo — um, Captain."

"And guard your left," Elath replied.

"We're going to need another padded cup," I told him.

He grunted agreement. "So I see, and this one man-sized. Karenndos, attend me after we bathe. We'll fit you out from the armory."

"As you command, Lo — Captain Elath."

"So. Ever held a sword before?"

"No, Captain. I mean yes, Captain, I've held one, but only to give it to a warrior after he mounts. I never used one," Karenndos replied nervously, clearly wishing himself back in the stables.

"It's a late start but I've known good warriors who started later. Stand still." Elath handed the two swords he carried, mine and his both, to me. He walked around Karenndos as he might a new horse, weighing strength and weakness, looking for flaws. I half

expected him to peel my groom's lips back to examine his teeth. But he measured shoulder width from behind, arm thickness, thigh and calf. "Bend down with your knees stiff and touch the ground," he commanded. "Good. Stand up. You look fit enough."

"We threw javelins yesterday afternoon, Captain," I supplied. "He's not bad, about as accurate as half our men."

"Meaning, I would guess, as good as that half who can't throw worth a tinker's dam? We'll work on it." He held out his hand for his sword. "Karenndos, Enorath, sit over there and watch. Hulvan, counters again. Let's see how much you remember from yesterday morning."

Eventually the captain gestured for me to take a break and for Enorath and Karenndos both to stand before him, my groom using my too-light sword. Syarin reached for my helmet even as I unstrapped it. He sat cross-legged beside me on the dewy grass with the heavy bronze atop his thighs, leaning forward slightly so that the horsehair crest tickled under his chin. I said quietly, "Biggest groin-guard that I ever saw. Fanciest, too!"

He swallowed his laughter and almost choked on it. Then he leaned backwards, cradling the helmet to suggestively cover his dagger and shields and almost to his belly-button. "Maybe an Ogre would wear one this big, you think?"

I tossed my head back. "Not even an Ogre. Giant, maybe."

"Nah, it'd just fit over the tip of a Giant's dick. Maybe a little boy-Giant?" He wagged it back and forth atop his legs and tummy, making the dark blue crest ripple.

"So where is Hidarros with this surprise?" I looked around. We had acquired Dalanni and Harthin and Trammik by now, and Pollos and Jeilin laughed at some joke as they crossed the distant moat bridge on their way here, but of Cook's older boy I saw no sign.

"He'll be here. Later."

Elath drilled the two beginners in basic stance and defense now, all three of them facing away from the castle as they imitated him. Soon, I knew, he'd teach them the set-pieces he insisted all his warriors know, the drills that taught reflexes to parry, feint, attack, recover, all in a smooth flow. For now he concerned himself with their grips on the wooden swords, their stance and balance, their movement forward, back and sideways. Boy and youth aped him with total concentration.

Watching them work, I ignored the other boys who trickled up from the castle until Hidarros plunked himself down beside me. From the corner of my eye I saw he wore a faded blue loincloth this morning. “Rholam watch over you, Lord Hulvan.”

I nodded good morning without taking my eyes off the practice session. While I knew my skills weren’t bad for my age I didn’t fool myself that I possessed anything approaching the captain’s expertise. But Elath stopped in mid-demonstration, lowered his sword, and looked quizzically over my head. I turned to follow his gaze down toward the castle. Five undercooks strode uphill, laden with wicker baskets and a couple of heavy ground-cloths. My elbow hit Syarin in the ribs. “This is the surprise, is it?”

He nodded with a big grin.

To my other side, Hidarros said: “I told Pa about you training out here every morning and that the captain said it was all right for us to watch and so did Talithos and so I asked him if he’d send breakfast out to us all.”

“Us all?” It looked like enough food to feed a village. The kitchen servants bowed casually in my direction and began unpacking baskets onto the spread cloths. Pewter goblets and ewers, wooden plates, nothing easily breakable.

“Sure. You and the captain and all us boys and Father Talithos, too. I guess he’ll come up later this morning, I told him about it. And, and...” He frowned, his voice trailing off. “Who’s that? Isn’t he your groom?”

“Karenndos, yes,” I said. “I daresay there’s enough for him as well. And probably the entire stable staff.”

Elath made certain that his trainees ate sparingly, but Hidarros led the other boys at more serious inroads into the food his father had sent us. It was still far too much even when Talithos joined us, the priest of Rholam little bigger than a boy himself and with a boy’s smooth face for all the white which had begun to fade the curly brown hair at his temples the last year or two. When the captain indicated that my turn had come to spar with him once more, Talithos gathered up his charges, less Enorath, and led them down the hill toward the castle. Only Hidarros remained, still munching a fresh roll with thick cream and strawberry preserves squeezing out, a spare held in his free hand. Already past the age of required study in the chapel, he would presently return to his father’s kitchen.

When Kolldoi’s Chariot rolled into full view above the eastern peaks and burned

the last of the dew away, we four made our way back to the castle. We crossed the moat bridge, the guard saluting with javelin clanging against shield. Elath made Karenndos and Enorath go back and enter the gate again and return the salute properly, fist against breastbone. Karenndos started for the stables without thought.

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

“Back to my tasks, my Lord.”

“Not before we’re bathed. Come on.”

He looked confused. “But, Lord Hulvan, grooms bathe at the big water trough in the stables.”

I tossed my head back sharply. “You’re not a groom right now, not after you’ve just finished a workout on the warrior’s field. Come on. Don’t argue with me, Karenndos, just come along.”

My groom’s face set into emotionless lines and followed me toward the baths beneath the villa. But he balked like a half-trained horse at the top of the stairs, protesting. “Lord, this is for the residents of the villa and the warriors, not for the likes of me. I’m just a serf!”

I turned and stared up at him, fists on my leather-kilted hips. “Rholam guide me! Karenndos, just what do you think we’ve both been doing this morning if not training to become warriors? Birth has nothing to do with it. You think a bronze blade can’t kill an emperor as easily as a slave? Or a serf?” I climbed back up and grabbed his wrist, pulled him down the stairs with me.

The eunuchs saw him coming, of course. Our chief bath-eunuch Minthos and his next most senior bath-slave practically pounced on my groom to remove his ragged loincloth, tsk-ing with exaggerated disgust about his hairy, sweaty body but commenting favorably to one another about the length and thickness of his spear as though he weren’t even attached to one end of it. They scrubbed the four of us thoroughly before letting us near their clean hot pool. After a muscle-easing soak, I lay under Reldon’s strong, gentle hands while he massaged the last of Elath’s smelly oil and salve mixture into my damp skin. I still looked like something to frighten babies, but I had moved reasonably well this morning.

Meanwhile Minthos and Liannin stood Karenndos on the slatted woodwork over the drains to slather his damp body with depilatory cream, turning him into a foamy

marble-white statue from the neck down. They warned him straight-faced that he mustn't move a muscle lest the concoction eat right through his skin and leave him a naked skeleton. Naturally he believed this arrant nonsense and stood rigid as a basalt gargoyle, rolling his eyes while his sweat pooled beneath the stinking cream and the sand trickled down through the timer. Finally they doused him and scrubbed away all the hair below his neck. Probably years of stable grime as well. He looked down at his newly pink and naked self and shook his head doubtfully. They bathed him thoroughly again and put him back into the hot pool before drying him, turning cheerfully deaf ears to his protests.

"So you're a serf," Minthos finally told him. "I should be impressed? We're all slaves in here. See this?" He lifted a leg and shook the heavy silver chain about his ankle, making it jingle. The master of the bath didn't bother to mention that my father had freed him every Karkoseid for at least the last eight years that I personally knew about, and he always refused. "Just let us do our work. Do I tell you how to wash a horse?"

Karenndos made no further complaint as they oiled and massaged him until nimble fingers attacked his spear. Then he reached down to cover himself with his hands, only to have them batted away impatiently. He looked to me for support, but voiceless Reldon had already coaxed my dagger to happy rigidity, using ordinary oil rather than Elath's numbing mix, which covered the rest of me. I just grinned across at my groom, watching Minthos skillfully manipulate his spear and shields while Liannin stood at the head of the table to work his shoulders, not coincidentally holding him down as well. "Bet my God visits me first, Karenndos. Of course, I've had a head start."

Enorath still splashed by himself in the cold plunge pool until heard my challenge to Karenndos. Then he climbed out, accepting with thanks the towel a eunuch wrapped about his shoulders. He stood watching us while the slave dried and casually massaged his body beneath the thick cloth. The boy observed Karenndos without a word, though my groom didn't notice. He lay rigid, eyes closed now, clearly trying not to twitch.

Minthos rather than Karenndos returned my challenge. "Lord, Elorria will visit this one in a hundred heartbeats." He looked back to his work, stroked up and down with both hands rapidly. "Make that twenty heartbeats." And he was right. Reldon made no effort to help me win that race, prolonging it rather, while Karenndos first whimpered and then gasped and finally erupted between Minthos' fingers as Liannin pinned him

firmly in place on the table. The eunuchs whistled and made ribald comments about the quality and quantity of the results. Eventually my groom lay limp on the table, inhaling sharply when Minthos cleaned and dried his newly-bared spear with a fresh towel.

Enorath shed his own towel into the eunuch's hands and walked over to my table. "Like in the chapel?" he asked me. Dorneth followed him without pause, standing behind and working the muscles of his shoulders and neck.

I nodded and took a deep breath before replying. "Not as sacrifice, though. Just for the pleasure of it."

"Will they massage me like that tomorrow?"

"Today if you want."

He shook his head. "Gotta go. Talithos will kill me if I stay too long. I'll sure be glad when the ShieldDay comes and I don't have to study in the Temple any more." He didn't leave, though, but stood watching beside my table while Dorneth behind him half-massaged his shoulders and upper arms.

Finally I bucked under Reldon's hands until forced to plead with the mute to cease his ministrations. Minthos and Liannin meanwhile had scraped the excess oil from my groom and tied a fresh loincloth on him, plain undyed linen but far better than the coarse strip of homespun he had worn before. Karenndos bowed toward me, newly bared skin glowing and eyes uncertain, then turned and fled up the stairs.

At the third table, I noticed despite Reldon's gentle cleansing of my dagger and shields, Elath watched him go. Then the captain closed his eyes with a faint smile as Wolden continued pummeling his legs.