



**The
Sword
SUNDERGOST**



ALEXANDER MARSHALL

The Sword Sundergost

by
Alexander Marshall

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Book One of
The Sword Sundergost

PROLOGUE

*Seven were the Great Ones, who walked
In the Wood that was before the World:
Raendu the Dreamer, Lord of Light, their King;
Kaela the Beautiful, Lady of Flowers; and her
Companion Raelle, the Green Rider;
Deldellu the Strong, Salmanar the Swift;
Nilnie of the Shadows, and He who is not named,
Raendu's brother, who broke the Staff of Life.*

-from The Book of Seven

The Lady Alagar stumbled on through the forest for a few paces, then was forced to crawl, holding the new-born baby close to her. She could hardly breathe now, and the shadows of green leaves swam before her eyes as she looked up at the distant stars through them —but the cries of her pursuers startled her back to full alertness and she crawled on, in pain.

She was full of terror, and knew that not much life remained to her —all her power she now invested in this small bundle that she dragged with her, this tiny baby, this young daughter, born but a few hours ago in turmoil in the wilderness of the Haunted Wood, far from any dwelling of men. How she wished now that she had listened to the King and the one-eyed man, Maranain of Rondar, who had called himself a Herald of Raendu, and never come to Restonia — but she had not believed the tales of wandering evil in the woods, she had not thought that there really could be Carthogs, Shadowed Men from the distant Dark Isles, so far

into this realm, and, being newly-wed, it had been easier to listen to counsels of joy and ease rather than those of caution and dismay. Thus they had made their brief happiness there at the millhouse in the Valley of the Tarthos—but too soon they had been driven out, south and west, to this forsaken forest. The one-eyed man had said that her marriage was special, important—but now it seemed they would both perish without discovering what he had meant.

Where was Lisaeon, her husband? They had become separated in the attack, she had cried out and he had not answered—he had not been there when the child was born, only poor Elessa her handmaiden had been with her, Elessa who had defied the monstrous Carthog as he had come at her, Elessa who had bought her a few brief moments to stumble away into the thickets and fall down into this bracken-choked dell. Her handmaiden was now slain, she felt certain of that—perhaps Lisaeon also lay dying or dead in some ditch under one of these forsaken trees. No matter—she would be joining them soon. Whether the Carthogs found her or not, she would perish within hours: she was too weak, too full of pain, to survive the night.

But she must make some attempt to save her new-born daughter: the barbarians must not get hold of the baby. She uncovered the tiny form cradled in her arms—its wrinkled face was quiet, as though, even in the anguish of birth, she had known that to cry out meant death. The child had yelled once only in emerging into the world, and had then been silent.

‘Ryna, you shall be called,’ said Alagar to herself. ‘Ryna, the Wild One in the tongue of Restonia.’

The child's new-opened eyes moved as though in a dream, seeing through her. What chance did a new-born babe such as this have in the wilderness? thought Alagar, looking about her. Trees and tangled bracken sheltered them both, but the noise and crash of movement around her urged her on. If only there were some place of safety nearby—but this was the Wood of Seven, the Haunted Wood, and it was abandoned by all good folk to the demons and wild things that dwelt within it.

Pain shot through her: as the night waned, so did her life, she knew. Something crashed through the bushes to her left and she almost cried out, but the figure plunged on, missing her. She wondered at that—how could these Carthogs, these beast-men whose senses were enhanced like those of an animal to scent any life even in the pitch of night, walk by her so? She froze still. Silence fell over the forest. Her pursuers, for whatever reason, had gone on, and she had eluded them.

The night was cold, and she trembled. The babe began to stir and to make noises of new life. She comforted it as best she could, but her own body cried out for comfort itself and she collapsed into a faint after only a few moments.

She did not know, when she opened her eyes, how much time had passed: it might have been moments, or hours. Light had grown about her, and her pain had eased. The child had fallen asleep—she felt its warmth and its new breath against her skin. She looked about her.

At first she thought it was the dawn coming through the trees from the east, but the light seemed strange. She moved a little and slid gently down a slope. The dell opened up into

a clearing, thick with grass. The light sat upon the grass as though a fragment of the sun had come to sleep there. She shielded her eyes, and crawled on a little way.

The clearing was perhaps fifty yards across, and full of a light that was as strong as daylight now, but not daylight. Gold and green shot through with white which occasionally blinded her filled the glade; light itself seemed to be dancing there.

‘This is death,’ she thought suddenly, realising that she was standing and feeling no pain. Blood from her birthing had dried dark on her robes, and it was that, and the stiffness of motion in her legs and arms that convinced her she was still in the mortal world: all else seemed spectral and unearthly.

‘The god comes for me,’ she thought.

Little Ryna was now crying out, and Alagar looked down at her. The green gold light showed her the face of her daughter clearly for the first time.

‘What things will you see and feel if you live, my little one?’ Alagar thought. ‘Would that I could grow to know you, my child. But you are fated to be alone, it seems.’

She stepped forward. A great silence, a peacefulness over the whole forest, enveloped her. She felt herself swooning. She had always trusted in Raendu, and so had no fear of what was now coming, but she still dreaded pain, and her mind turned to poor Lisaeon: must she leave him? she thought, as she walked on. But of course, leaving was part of returning, she said to herself, her mind now oddly peaceful. She had lost a lot of blood, and she fell in the thick grass at the bottom of the dell, the light that was not sunlight all

about her.

Someone was standing over her, she thought —someone's shadow came between her and the light. She peered up. No, it was not a person, it was a statue. Twelve feet tall it stood, grey and green and cracked, but standing noble and still in that deserted place. A dim memory tried to stir in her mind, but she was now too weak, and life was slipping away. She looked around: other statues stood there, some overgrown, all lit with the same holy light —she could not count them. Perhaps there were five others, perhaps more. The number seemed important, it seemed to be part of some memory, but she had no strength to force it from its hiding place in her mind now, she had no strength for anything. She crawled to the foot of the first statue.

It was a lady, a Green Lady, she thought, looking down at her from under its stone hood with eyes that held all the sorrow and beauty of the mortal world.

'Ryna,' Alagar said, 'Ryna,' but she had closed her eyes now and could not even feel the child at her breast.

'Oh Raendu my god,' she prayed with her last words, 'and Green Lady who rode with him before the beginning of time, in the Wood Before the World — watch over my child, and bring her to the light wheresoever she may stray.'

Thus Lisaeon, his sword red already with vengeance from the evil Carthogs that he had found and slain, coming but a few moments later, found his new wife dead under the statue of the Green Lady in the Glade of the Seven Statues in the Haunted Wood. And he looked on her face, and saw that she was at peace —but his own heart burned with a grief deeper

than any he had known, and he wept as the dawn came and filled the glade with the ordinary light of day.

He was tall, and fair, and mighty, and when he had finished weeping, he stood at the foot of the statue and swore that all his beloved's slayers would in their turn be slain, and he sought about for the child that he knew had been born in his absence in the forest, but he did not find it. Then he cried out in rage, pondering the further evil that he thought had been done there, and he plunged off into the Wood and left the enchanted glade, promising to return when his task was done.

Then the Carthogs —six of them remaining, with twisted visages and dark fangs, hunting through the forest for Alagar and the child that they had heard crying out in its birth and then falling silent— became the hunted: for Lisaeon fell on them one by one and slew them, and they fled before him.

As evening came again, Lisaeon pursued the last two of his enemies down a long slope into a broad valley in the heart of the Wood, and it was open to the sky there so that a purple twilight fell about them. There the huge beast-man who ran before him turned, and tried to stab him, with a snarl and slashing claws following his short sword. But Lisaeon fell aside, and rolled, and clambered to his feet before the exhausted Carthog could turn, and Lisaeon's sword severed his enemy's head from his shoulders and the great body toppled over and stained the green grass of that place with his black blood.

Then the remaining Carthog ceased to run but waited for Lisaeon at the bottom of the valley as the stars began to wink down in a cloudless sky. Lisaeon approached slowly, being

thoroughly weary in body and spirit, his fire now reduced to embers, and also because of caution of his foe, for he knew how dangerous a Carthog was as a fighter, especially when cornered and without hope. But this one waited for him weaponless —Lisaeon saw that he had thrown aside his sword and stood, breathing hard but remaining still, in the open grass. He paused.

The Carthog stood there, a dark shadow in the dusk. He stood with bowed shoulders and a brooding face. As Lisaeon drew closer he could see the look in his opponent's eye: it mirrored his own. Two distraught warriors, far from home, far from even hope of their lives, come at last to the end. Lisaeon lowered his own sword. It dripped with blood. None of that blood could be given to his beloved Alagar, none of it could now be used for the purpose it was made: the giving of life. He felt empty and still.

'What became of the child?' he said. He knew that Carthogs did not speak, but the question had leaped from him despite that. The dark figure looked at him. Somehow Lisaeon knew that no child's blood lay on this beast-man's hands that night: this creature's eyes spoke more than words. As Lisaeon looked at him in the starlight, great depths of darkness rolled aside in those half-animal eyes, and Lisaeon saw down into wells of torment that for a moment, a brief, fleeting instant, he knew were deeper even than his own. Here was a creature doomed to despair from his dark birth in a citadel of evil far from there; here was a life so full of shadows that light itself was accursed; here was a destiny forever severed from joy by sin that ran deeper than the foundations of the world. But in the very comprehension of

that torment, Lisaeon felt as a wave which almost drowned his heart, there was the eternal knowledge of, the eternal longing for, release.

Lisaeon staggered back as though he had been struck. His hand tightened on his sword. His opponent, however, did not move. What Lisaeon had felt had been no trick, no ploy of some new combat between them: it was real —more real than the darkness which now rapidly descended on them.

Lisaeon knew —and the knowledge, clashing with his smouldering desire for vengeance, was a brief but potent agony to him— that this creature had never known mercy, and that now mercy, for the first and last time, perhaps, in its entire mortality, was before it. Lisaeon was being asked —he knew not from where, nor by whom, nor why— to show mercy at that moment. He thought of the beautiful Alagar lying dead beneath the Statue; he thought of his child —he knew not whether it was a boy or girl— cradled in the wet earth of the wild, lost and without hope of life; he thought of many things as he stood there, holding his sword.

The creature did not move. Then Lisaeon lowered his sword and spoke in the High Tongue that the poets used.

‘I see something in thine eye, servant of evil,’ he said, ‘which tells me that thy servitude is not always a comfort to thee, nor do thy black deeds sit easily with thy spirit. I know not why I do this. Perhaps I am crazed with the loss of my beloved, and my child that I shall now never see —but I say to thee: begone! Leave my sight! I give to thee thy life. Let this be burned into thy soul, this thing that is alien to thee: let that which was never made to know mercy and love know it now, and maybe in such a way is my vengeance better

served, for I foretell that this will not bring thee any joy, and will lead thee to thy death. Let it be known that if I see thee again, thou shalt surely perish —and if thou shouldst harm my blood, thou shalt be accursed forever. Go!

The Carthog waited —then, with a howl that froze Lisaeon's blood in his veins, the creature turned and vanished into the gloom.

Lisaeon returned to where Alagar lay, and there died, in weariness, under the watchful eyes of the Seven Statues — but the child Ryna had vanished into the wood.

THE GIANT OF TARTHOS

*Let not the unlearned linger on the
Margins of knowledge, not knowing the
Truth, untrammelled and untouched by the
Music of minstrels, marvellous to hear.*

-from The Song of Ryna

Only at the end does all now seem clear to me —as clear as the waters of the Pool of Kaela in the Haunted Wood where I was born and where I recovered my soul. And each part of my life now seems to shine out as cleanly as did the pebbles at the bottom of that pool, smooth, round, each resting on the one beneath. But it is only at the end of mortal life that one is granted this clarity of sight, for it was not so when I was young: then each day was clouded, and each year full of shadows. In youth, one sees only one's own reflection in the water of life, as in a twisted mirror, and what is beneath the water lies hidden.

I am Ryna, called Mistress of Tara, and many other names beside. Many are the songs sung round that name —but herein are my own words, without music, and I shall leave out much that the minstrels have put in, and you shall here read much that no one knows but I, and that has never been put in any song, unless it be the song of falling water beyond the world, that was never meant for mortal ears.

Time, as I say, now seems like a pool of clear water, and the years of my youth swim nearby. I can see Helca's Castle, deep in Restonia, tall in the light of the morning, as the sun

peers down over the mountains, its banners flying in the breeze of a late summer long ago. It had stood there for hundreds of years, the home of kings and seat of the throne of Restonia since Helca I had built it. In those days the last autumn of peace approached, and the dark days ahead were only a shadow in the rumours of travelling men —for had not Seleca, the old queen who had fallen under a shadow, died? And was there not a new, young Helca, fourth of that name, on the throne? I was young then, and shared the joy of the people of the realm, whose houses clustered about the feet of the castle. Here, the sun shone, and the growing strife of other lands came only in tales —stories of burned farms and lost cartloads of wool, and wandering beggars in greater and greater numbers, from the south. Here, in the heart of the realm, the people and I took comfort that they had a new king, and the old queen, whose ways had become strange in her later years, was dead. The king had allowed them to bear arms once again and to defend themselves against evil, and he was handsome, and strong, and learned —the summer had been fine, the harvest looked promising, and the yield of wool was good. If the young king sometimes seemed worried, we strove not to see it.

In the market-place of the town, then, through the whole colourful and joyous day, the girls talked of the king and the merchants talked of opening up the southern roads again, and the sun shone, and the children played. But in a lonely shadowed place in the courtyard of the castle, where all was quiet but for the barking of the dogs and the scurrying of the chickens, a young girl of perhaps fifteen summers held a heavy sword at arm's length and tightened her teeth in pain.

I remember that pain —it had begun a long time before, and I had imagined it as a small dragon, wound about my arm, biting and burning —for I was that girl, and I feel the youth running in my blood even now with that memory. But then the pain of holding out that sword had become a cold pain, as though my muscles were frozen in ice, unfeeling but heavy. Still I held out the thing, point upwards, and stared ahead, shaking.

It had begun as a challenge —the boys, teasing me, had dared me to hold old King Helca I's sword for more than an hour, something that only the strongest of them could do, for it was a heavy old broadsword, seemingly made out of stone, and it took more than one hand even to unsheath it from its resting place by the hearth in the great hall. Now it was the third hour and it was growing dark out there in the cloisters, and the boys, at the end of the first hour, had no longer jeered but had stayed their distance with a mixture of awe and fear which I had thought fitting.

'She always was a strange one,' they said in whispers that I heard as they watched me standing there straining, and they remembered the stories of how I'd been found wild in the woods, my real parents unknown. 'A weirdling child,' some of them said, 'a changeling!' But none dared say it to my face, for I was a hard and strong fighter, like the women of northern Valadria, and could never smile at their taunts — or at much else either. How serious is youth! Sometimes, not knowing the place of pain, it can feel no joy either. But at this time the boys had gone down to the market. Only Alina, poor, plain Alina who was too weak, and perhaps too idle, stood in the Cloisters worried and awed as she watched the

pain on my face. Dear Alina! I treated her badly, for with my seriousness came coldness, and I drove her warmth away, though I would not see it. She loved me, I see now, with the unpondered love that the young have for one another.

‘Ryna,’ she whispered, ‘stop now. It’s over an hour. You’ve shown them. It must hurt so!’

‘Get away!’ I hissed. ‘I won’t listen to any of you!’ My face grimaced as a stab of pain went up my arm again. Alina chewed her bottom lip and clutched her skirt, fretting. She wished she could be as brave as me, I thought: but I, with my dark hair with its fiery streaks and my pale, stern face, could also be frightening. I wanted it thus.

An old man, not seeing us amongst the shadows, walked out from a door on his stick, muttering to himself. Then he saw me, standing alone, stiff as a statue in the shadows of the cloisters, my breath coming hard now. He saw the sword in my hand and the pain on my face as he drew nearer, and he understood what I was doing. He always understood: he was the old Lord Visaeon, my guardian.

‘My little jewel,’ he said softly. ‘They have been teasing you again. Don’t say anything—but I’ll warn you now: when you put the sword down, it will hurt a lot more than it does now. Are you ready?’

He stood near me to steady me, and I fell suddenly into his arms as the blade clanged to the stones. I yelled out as the sharpness spasmed in my muscles, and bit his robes to stifle my yells—I did not want anyone to hear me.

‘You’re too old for these games now, my jewel,’ he whispered, stroking my hair. ‘You need to outgrow their words. Why, you’re verging on fifteen summers now.’

I looked at him coldly. The pain in my arm was subsiding. 'I'll never be too old to lose my pride,' I said stiffly.

'Aye. That's what I'm afraid of,' he replied. 'Come and eat with me, come.'

I wished he had been my father. But I had never dared ask him who my father and mother had been. The shadow of the truth was darker even than the darkness of not knowing, it seemed to me then. I followed him indoors, and Alina came after.

The young King Helca was troubled. Since the death of his old mother, Queen Seleca, only a few months ago, he had tried to restore order to the kingdom of Restonia, but he had been slowly failing—for in Seleca's time, evil had been allowed to creep across the borders of Restonia for the most part unhindered. Shadowed Men, they said, had encamped in the South; vagabonds and ill-looking folk had settled in the common lands; gangs of uncouth and unfriendly men and sometimes women roamed the countryside, occasionally rioting and burning. Seleca had forbidden the open wearing or use of arms amongst her own people, but these strangers had brought in their own weapons, and the local lords had been forced to defy the Queen's Law to defend themselves and their people. Helca had re-armed them, but there was almost an open rebellion in parts of the countryside south of the proper border, and the poor harvest and dark plagues which tormented the Middle Lands some said might be brought to Restonia by these wandering folk to make matters worse. The people had looked to Helca with hope, dismissing these shadows—but some, especially in the

south, were beginning to feel disquiet, which might soon turn into feelings of betrayal. Peace, like autumn sunlight, had been brief, as even I began to see —something had to be done.

So much I knew already, for I was always keen of ear and eye, especially in those days, and I was often to be found around the tables of my elders, or listening in dark corners around the fire in the great hall, or at the elbow of some lord as he drank with his fellows in waiting on the King at Court. I was able to avoid the watchful eye of the old Visaeon, my guardian, and was often found awake and roaming the corridors long after the other younger folk were asleep. I knew, then, that the edges of Restonia were disturbed, and sometimes I would walk on the battlements and look out over the green hills and the river which wound about the castle and wonder at the troubles I had heard described. I had never seen a battle or a rebellion, but I had once seen a dead man —a Shadowed Man, a Carthog, brought to the castle slung over a horse by the Lord Reskille in proof that their brood was indeed encroaching on that Lord's lands near to the southern border.

I had looked on the corpse, fascinated, appalled, awed: firstly, here was death, a tangible thing, written on the face of a man once living; secondly, here was a Shadowed Man, one of the evil race of men from the dawn of time, before the foundation of Gandria itself —one of the race which had in ages past pursued evil, and abandoned the ways of Raendu. He had been grey of skin —I knew not then whether that was his real colour or whether death had done that to him. His eyes had been open and wildly staring, but staring at

nothing, as a painted eye in the Hall of Pictures stared at nothing. He had worn brass necklaces and arm-rings, and his teeth also seemed to be of brass, glinting from a mouth which was opened a little too wide. I had shivered, watching him being uncovered on that cold night in the Autumn last year—and then Visaeon had turned and seen me, and scolded me, and turned me away to my bed. But I had not been able to sleep—that grey face with the gaping mouth had haunted me, and I had tried to imagine the people from which it had come: did they have children? I had wondered. Perhaps I was a Shadowed Man's child?

For I knew that I didn't belong there in Restonia—there was something about me, something in my blood, which made the life of the castle, the only life I could remember, alien to me. I knew I was different from the other folk, driven by different things, feeling strange feelings which I knew they couldn't understand. Perhaps it really was because I was the child of a Shadowed Man and Woman, given over to evil before I was even born. I had wept myself to sleep that night.

Now again I was thinking about that face as I ate in the hall of the castle, for the King, up on the dais, had entered cold and frowning, and I imagined hordes of Shadowed Men encamped about the realm, and saw them coming in through the gate to take me away to a father and mother too terrible to even think of. My arm still hurt. The other young folk were sat a little distance away at the same table. Only Alina dared sit near me.

'They say the King is to make a pronouncement tonight,' Alina said with her mouth full. 'What is a pronouncement,

Ryna?’

‘He will say something of importance, something that we all should hear and know,’ I told her. Alina was always like that, I realised —she would always ask me something I already knew so that I could feel superior in telling her. It was her way of staying close; she had a child’s wisdom.

I wondered what the pronouncement would be. From the look on the king’s face, it was not good. The whole fabric of a kingdom can ripple from its king’s looks, as I was later to well discover. I determined then to stay awake that night and creep to one of my hiding places in the Great Hall so that I could hear what would be said.

That was easy, for I was old enough now to sleep without a guard or nurse at the door, and I went barefoot. The stones of the floor were cold with the frostiness of the night as I shuffled down to the little door next to the fireplace—but I found it locked when I reached the bottom, and was forced to climb all the way back up and beyond to the tiny owl’s loft overlooking the great dais, where the ropes were kept. I was just in time to hear the King’s speech.

Helca was a young and handsome man, dark of hair, tall and slender, strong and learned. He had been away, north in Valadria, and had travelled much in the Middle Lands, for most of his young life. Most of the young girls of the castle, of my age and older, would swoon over him and laugh and cry together as they plotted his matrimony with each one in turn. I would have none of that—I was different in my thoughts, as I ever was. Helca was indeed a promising king, I thought and heard, returning to Restonia in the time of its greatest need, armed with knowledge and strength of arms

and a noble manner —but it had not been enough, and the few months that he had sat on the throne showed in his pale grey eyes. I looked down, on him, unseen, from the loft —I had seen that look before somewhere, I thought, but I could not remember where: it was the look of despair, a thing I felt I knew from ages past. Someone long ago had looked at me with eyes like that, but who that might have been I could not remember.

Helca was explaining something to the folk who had gathered there —and the hall was indeed full of the people of the castle, not only the lords and ladies who dwelt there, but many whom I had not yet seen. They had ridden in that day as evening fell —I had known of it, but had not wanted to break my ordeal of the sword to find out more. Now here they stood, attentive to the King, firelight flickering in their noble faces and on their bright clothes and glittering armour.

I did not at first pay attention to what he was saying, but then listened as he went on in a raised voice:

‘Therefore, let it be known that I hereby re-establish, for the good of the peoples of the whole of Shand, but in the main for the good of Restonia, that Company of Knights, open to all that shall be deemed worthy by an act or acts of great courage in defence of honour, which was of old called the Crimson Company, after the banner of our kingdom; and that they shall be pledged to defend the good against evil, to defy dishonour and to protect and further the cause of order against the forces of darkness.’

In so saying, the King held up a parchment, with writing upon it which I could not see, but which I guessed was the proclamation of what he had said.

A murmur went round the hall —some voices spoke excitedly; others, I thought, grumbled and muttered words of dissent. For to some, perhaps, the pronouncement opened the realm of Restonia to adventurers with swords from outside who might be worse than the evil they were devised to contain. The King was not oblivious to this, I thought, as he went on:

‘Let now there stand forth any one of this noble company who would deem himself worthy to wear the Crimson which will mark him as a man of great honour, and which will open the doors of my realm to him. Who among ye has the courage to defend Restonia?’

And then I saw something of the risk that Helca was taking with this pronouncement, for in the silence which followed, I wondered if anyone at all would step forth —and if they did not, how this would affect the King’s grip on his kingdom and his people. The faces were all quiet and still in the firelight, all looking up at the King. The only sound was the crackle of the large fire in the hearth. I thought that quietness would go on forever. My heart suddenly reached out to the young king, and I wondered what great shadow had fallen over the realm that required such an edict.

Then someone who had already been standing on the dais out of my sight came forward and bowed. It was the old Chancellor, my guardian, Visaeon of the Silver Hair, who had long been the voice of reason and honour in Seleca’s decaying reign, and who was much loved and admired in Restonia. He had spent long years in Seleca’s prison for his defiance, but he had never lost his love for her despite her evils, and she had known that at least of him, and had not

slain or harmed him. He knelt now before the king, leaning on his cane, and said:

‘My lord king, if you deem me worthy, I would wear such a colour.’

A mutter and a sigh of astonishment went around the hall. I could tell after a moment, even from my high perch, that Helca himself was on the verge of weeping.

‘Lord Visaeon,’ the King said, ‘you, of all those present here, have no need of such a colour to mark your honour. I would bestow it upon you readily, did I but feel that you have already discharged your obligations to this realm, many times over.’

‘Then, your majesty,’ the old man went on, looking at the feet of the King, ‘I would that you would take your sword and slay me here and now —for I look about me and I find no one ready to defend the land that I love from the growing evil which we know marches closer each day —and I find no honour in our enemies, and I would at least die at the hands of a man of honour. And if it is so that I have discharged my obligations to this land, then I have nought else to live for.’

There was a silence.

The King turned suddenly to them again, and spoke in a louder and more intense voice, verging on anger:

‘Is there no one here who will stand forth? Or is your king to be forced to knight his oldest and frailest courtier before your eyes, thus dishonouring you all? Where is the youth of Restonia?’

At this, as one, the faces of the crowd looked up and saw a lithe, young figure descending a rope to the dais from a tiny loft in the ceiling of the hall. A great gasp went up as the

figure stepped towards the King and bowed, sinking on one knee.

‘Ryna!’ whispered Visaeon to himself as he looked up. ‘Oh, in Raendu’s name, not now!’

I knelt before the King, wearing my white bed-gown, my hair shimmering like part of the firelight. Helca stood before me astonished. All the eyes of the hall were on me. Strangely, I did not feel afraid, but spoke straight to the King, with whom I had had no more than a few words in my whole life.

‘Your Majesty, here is the youth of Restonia. Give your Crimson to me.’

The King, and all the hall, paused.

‘Ryna,’ said the King at last, ‘how much did you hear of what has occurred here tonight? Do you know what you are saying, and where you are, or do you walk in your sleep, as a child?’

‘My lord, I have heard all,’ said I, in a strong voice which carried even to the back of the hall, ‘and if I walk in sleep, then this is the dream I have long wished for. And some would say that I am no longer a child, but if I am, then I kneel before you as a child of Restonia, your majesty.’

I hardly knew where the words I spoke came from, only that they flowed from me as though many times rehearsed. The whole scene seemed like a dream, in fact, as though I was playing out a tale I had heard before I was even born — and I was filled with the firelight and the gaze of the many lords and ladies there.

‘Ryna,’ said the King gently, ‘I know not whether to scold you —and your master, who has failed in his duty of watchfulness over you— or to do you honour, for indeed you

alone of all the youth of my realm have come forth at my bidding. But I cannot give you what you ask, for the Crimson Company is to be made up from knights of the most tried and tested mettle: its dangers will be real, its challenges daunting, its tasks much demanding of prowess and feats of arms. You have not the age to have yet shown yourself worthy in these fields, though I doubt not your courage. Return now to your bed. I fear you have shamed many a noble head tonight, and my Company is now the calling of old men and children, it seems. Let your master come forward and fetch you from this place.'

Visaeon had been steadily getting to his feet, and now bowed before the King, gripping my arm. But I pushed him off and spoke again to Helca, again to his face, for I was almost as tall as he.

'King, what would I then need to do to prove my worth?'

'Ryna —a feat of arms more befitting to a full-grown knight,' Helca replied.

'So be it!' cried I, and left the dais without Visaeon's help. As I walked through the crowd, unheeding their astonished and in some cases admonishing glances, I heard the King announce that his proclamation would be sent out to the corners of the four realms of Shand, and even into the Middle Lands, and that for one month and one day he would await the response. I did not remember returning to my bed, but felt that I had swooned on the stairs and been carried the rest of the way.

Dawn found me awake and on top of the battlements of Helca's Castle, looking east as the sun rose above the snowy

tips of the Mountains of Morning. A chill wind followed it, but I was well wrapped in my thickest winter cloak. No one had stopped me from climbing up there.

I remembered completely what had happened the previous night: everything, much more fully than most other things that I had ever seen or heard. Somehow I felt I had crossed an unseen line that night, and my spirit was quieter—I did not know how to explain it even to myself, and it was to ponder that that I had gone up there, to one of my favourite seats, from where I could look out upon the larger world, north, south, east and west.

North lay the low hills of northern Restonia. Beyond them I knew was the ancient realm of Valadria, and beyond that, stories said, bright Silverian, on the edge of song; west lay the woods and rivers at the heart of four-kingdomed Shand, and that way lay the land of Miria and the golden Shandhall where the High Throne sat empty. To the south, beyond many miles of farming land and villages, lay the edge of Restonia and the mysterious forest called the Wood of Seven, the Haunted Wood, into which no man went. The mountains cut off all the view east, but I had heard of lands on the other side of them too, and one day I meant to journey there. I wondered, as the sun rose into a sky crowded with clouds, where did the sun come from, and was there an eastern end of things? As I looked out across the lands and thought these things, I felt the closest thing to joy that I had ever yet felt, like a bird that for the first time has flown from the nest.

'Ryna!' came a quiet voice from the stairs that led up to the battlements. 'Are you up here? Oh, goodness, it's so cold!'

Alina's head emerged from the darkness, and, seeing me

sitting there, she paused.

‘Come up, Alina,’ I said, and gave her a little smile. Alina clambered up at once, and sat at my feet out of the wind.

‘What happened last night?’ the dark-haired girl asked. ‘Did you do something?’

I laughed a single laugh. ‘Yes, I did something,’ I said.

Alina paused and looked at her friend —a fey mood, she most likely thought. It was not like Ryna to laugh, no doubt she was thinking. She dared not say anything.

‘But I didn’t do enough,’ I went on after a while.

She had come to find me, and I remembered I had arranged to go with her to fetch two horses from one of the lords who lived nearby, less than a day’s ride to the west. All the men that could be spared were needed for the garrisons of the southern fiefs and for work around the castle, so we were to travel alone, for the road to Tarthos and to the land beyond was accounted safe, being close to the heart of the realm —and I had travelled many times there alone, for the abandoned millhouse at Tarthos, near where the Falls spilled into the southern meadows, had a magic for me, and I was drawn to it, I knew not why: I wondered who it had been that had lived there, not all that long ago, but I did not ask, for some invisible hand always beckoned me to silence when I thought of it. The most that I had heard had been that two young lovers had dwelt there, but that evil men had come from the south and set upon them, and driven them from the mill and they had died in the wilderness. Something in my heart reached out to those lovers, but a fear came upon me too when I thought of them, and so I learned no more.

Would that I had, perhaps! For how different might this

tale have been had I known the truth, and maybe I would have been sitting with my children before a fire now rather than dying in the wilderness far from any land of men. I see now that Raendu had a path laid out before me. It was my own feet that took me from it, as this tale will tell—and yet, even a wandering river comes eventually to the sea, under the light of Raendu’s Star.

It was a very mild autumn day as we set out. The air was fresh, with a light breeze blowing from the south. We rode out from the gate and took the northward road for some miles, greeting farmers and passing through many small villages. Restonia did not then seem to me to be a land threatened by war: sheep grazed on the hillsides, folk went about their business seemingly unworried, and the shadow of menace which I had seen on Helca’s face seemed but a fantasy of the castle, locked within its stone walls, unconcerned with the light of day. What purpose now did his Crimson Company serve? I saw no enemy host, no dark emissaries, no death, no blood.

We accomplished our errand, and on our way back I guided us down the lonely path to the mill, as we had often ridden before, and we stopped often to enjoy the open glades or the flowers, or to eat or drink. Eventually, as the sun began to drop to afternoon, the villages grew fewer, and the farmhouses looked lonely and were scattered.

I reined my horse to a stop under a large beech tree. I looked out at the weather. Clouds were building up in the west, and it seemed rain would fall during the night, or perhaps before nightfall.

‘We’ve made good progress,’ I said eventually. ‘We should

be home well before the sun sets, even if we pause to visit the old mill.'

'Ryna,' Alina began quietly, 'why must we go to this place? I am afraid of it. They say it is a place of ill omen. Let us go on!'

'It makes me happy to come there,' I said. 'I have so little that makes me happy.'

'Why can you not be content with your life as it is arranged for you?' Alina went on suddenly. 'You will grow in the safety of the castle to a fine woman. It would not be long before some handsome young man notices your fiery hair and your beautiful face. And even if he doesn't, the Lord Visaeon, who has been your guardian since a child, will find someone for you. You could be very happy. Why do you always torment yourself so?'

I was silent for a while. It was unlike Alina to speak like this. I looked in my friend's eyes, and then looked away

'I do not know, Alina,' I said at last, 'but maybe it is different for you than for I. Though your father and mother are gone too, you at least know who they were, and the plague which fetched them away was no fault of yours. But I do not know who my parents were, and I am haunted by horrible dreams. Sometimes I think, somehow, that I was the cause of their deaths, whoever they were. And somehow, I don't know how or why, somehow I feel that Helca's Castle is not my home. Do you understand?'

I looked at Alina again, but she just nodded and did not know what to say.

We spoke no more but rode on a little way, leading the two horses we had brought with our own mounts. The woods

began to climb low, rolling hills, and several small streams crossed our way. Soon we climbed a steeper woodland path and came to the top of a ridge, and looked down into the Valley of the Tarthos. There was the mill, to our left. Some of the ground looked as though it had been burned in years gone by. A tower of stone had partly collapsed, and the water of the Tarthos poured noisily over the idle wheel into a broad pool of grey water. A mist had already sprung up across the pool. Further downstream, away down the valley, the Tarthos plunged over falls and disappeared on its way to join the mightier Shandbound river to the west and south, winding past the still peaceful villages of the downs and vales at the heart of Shand. It was a beautiful, haunting place—it haunted me, at least. But on that day I felt something was wrong.

I at once dismounted and led the horses quietly into the shelter of the nearby trees. I looked out from between their low branches, and felt my heart beating heavily in my breast.

There was no sign of life, and the only noise was the river endlessly falling over the wheel. The mill lay about a stone's throw to the left, clustered around with several oaks. Though I could see no one, I was suddenly certain that someone was near. I signalled to Alina to be silent.

'We'll have to get nearer. But we must be quiet,' I whispered—but one look at Alina's face showed me that there was no use asking her to do anything: the girl was white-faced and frozen to the spot, sensing my own disquiet. I tied up the horses and stole around to the back of the mill.

The thunder of the river now concealed any sound I might make. In the dim light I could see the looming form of the

old mill before me. There was still no noise or movement there. I crept nearer.

I was not certain that what I was feeling was fear. It seemed more to me that my every nerve was tight, that my ears and eyes were sharper than usual, and that my breathing and my heart were louder. But I did not at all feel as though I should turn back. Something waited within for me, I knew not what.

I neared the mill. To my left the river came out of the woods and spilled over the great wheel; in front of me towered the bulk of the stone wall. There was a door in it. Briefly my mind conjured pictures of what terrible creatures might suddenly leap out from that place, with wide jaws and huge eyes, their claws slashing: Shadowed Men, perhaps, or other evil things; there they had lain waiting for me and nothing I could do would deny them. But the pictures passed quickly, and nothing emerged from the door.

I backed away and was soon in the trees again. Still there had been no sound, no movement. I wondered if the feeling I had had of the place had been true after all. Perhaps the wraiths of the dead lovers lived here—for some reason, tears welled up in me at the thought—but except for the signs of a fire and the collapsed tower, this looked like any other quiet corner of Restonia. I began to feel almost peaceful. Without looking back, I came back to Alina, who was weeping with fear by the horses.

‘Oh, Ryna!’ she cried. ‘Let us go now, quickly!’

Clouds swept overhead. A few drops of rain fell. Light was dim. A fog had filled the valley, but the wind was growing again and driving it away in strands past me,

through the trees. The mill stood there in the mist, looking like a distant castle, forlorn and dark. From further away came the dim murmur of the Falls.

I drew my sword —I did not know why. Perhaps there really was something or someone in the mill. The long blade weighed heavy in my hand. I saw suddenly that it was not a plaything, or something to be practised with in the courtyards of the castle with the boys as they trained: I held a weapon, something I might have to kill with, something upon which my own life might depend. I walked forward, down into the valley. If someone dwelt in those ruined stones, I would draw them out.

The silence of the afternoon was broken only by the river. All birds seemed to flee from that place at my coming. As I drew near the fallen tower of the mill the wind moaned amongst its stones. I steadied myself. I remembered that I was still in the heart of Shand, not in some shadowy realm of legend, and raised my sword.

‘Ho there, stranger!’ I cried in the loudest voice I could manage.

My voice echoed unnaturally around the old tower, above the mournful sound of the wind. Rain began to fall steadily.

‘Oh, Ryna! For Raendu’s sake! There’s no one there, no one living —please, please, come away!’ Alina cried from the ridge, in a quiet voice half to herself, knowing that she could not sway me, and shivering in the cold and from a terror greater than herself. The sense that some invisible presence haunted the mill had now grown into an almost tangible thing, even for her.

I walked forward a few paces, and climbed over the stones

that had once been an outer wall of some other structure, perhaps a house.

‘Do you hear me, stranger? Come out!’

I did not know now what mood possessed me —a fire filled all my body, and I felt unafraid of anything, at least for a moment, as though I had drunk brandy —but a sudden chill gripped me when I saw something move in the ruins: I could not make it out in the rain, which began to fall more heavily. Then a deep voice echoed over the river’s noise, saying:

‘I am not of Tarthos.’

‘What?’ I said, half to myself. What did it mean? I felt cold now, as a shadow began to move somewhere amid the stones. I had half convinced myself that there really was no one there.

A huge figure stepped out into the dim half-light. Alina screamed and hid.

It was a very tall man, very broad across the shoulders, wearing a leather jerkin bound to his massive frame with what looked like thongs of leather. He stood seven feet high, I thought, his arms and legs as round as small trees. His skin was dark —I could not tell if he was really that dark or merely unclean— and his face grim. A black scar almost closed one eye. A huge scabbard hung from a belt, holding a sword that must have been twice the length of my blade. All of these things I took in in a moment and though I now felt very afraid, as I continued to look I was also a little relieved, for my mind came to rest on seeing that, though huge for a man, the stranger was not unnaturally large, not taller than the trees as a tale might have made him, as the minstrels

were to make him in song; and also I saw that his one open eye was not in the centre of his forehead as my imagination had first placed it, but where it would be in an ordinary man's face. He was a mortal man —though I had never seen anyone so tall nor so strong.

He stood before me in the centre of the clearing in front of the mill now. The trees and stones around us looked small and puny in comparison to him.

'Do the folk of this land now send their children to taunt me?' he said, looking at me fiercely. He spoke with a savage, halting accent.

'Giant,' said I, in the tongue of the poets and warriors, 'wherefore art thou in Shand?'

I brandished my sword as I spoke, though what I hoped to do with it I knew not.

'I have no desire to slay children,' he said, and walked off.

Of all the things that might have happened, that he might have done, or that fate might have brought to pass, this one thing infuriated me more than all, and, abandoning my reason, I rushed at his back and slashed at his legs with my sword. The giant cried out and dodged the worst of the blow, but it cut him nevertheless, and he turned around to face me again.

Quicker than lightning he had grabbed me by the throat. His hand almost encircled it. He drew me close to his face. It was not an ugly face, but its largeness and fierceness froze my blood. He peered at me.

'Listen to me!' he hissed. 'I will not slay children! Tell your people to leave me alone!' he shouted at me —and the last three words hit me with such force that I felt I would faint. I

could hardly breathe. He flung me aside and stormed off, heading back to the millhouse.

I fell heavily on the slippery earth. I coughed and trembled. But then a rage fell on me which I had never experienced before. I was no longer as I had been, but became a crazed beast, and could see nothing but the giant's retreating form before me. I grasped my sword and, crying out something incoherent, lunged for him. The point of my blade pierced his thigh at the back, and he yelled out and fell to his knees. But the force of his fall had jerked the blade from my hands, and I stood there now unarmed before him. As he turned to me, his face pained and furious, I lost all courage born of rage and turned and fled towards the Falls of Tarthos.

I slipped and fell several times in the mud which the rain had created between me and the riverbank, but fortunately the giant was equally hindered by his wound, and fell behind me. I reached the river in a few moments, and turned to face my foe.

He had my sword now—it looked more like a thin dagger in his mighty grip—and he was lunging towards me. I half fell, half slipped into the water—and he followed me. But instead of being able to swim across the current as I had hoped, my ankle was caught and I was pulled back towards him. There was no hope of defying his strength—I felt my leg would be crushed by his grip—and slowly I came into his arms, now beneath the water.

He was shouting something, I could not tell what. Just as I was about to burst from lack of air he lifted me up and threw me across the river. For a brief moment the world spun, and

then I was underwater again, this time being swept along by the current towards the falls. I had no idea of my bearings, and floundered desperately. Then suddenly I felt his grip on me again. He lifted me up and brought my face out of the water and close to his.

He shouted something again above the noise of the falls, now quite close, and the hiss of the rain, now very heavy.

'You little fool!' he cried. 'You will drown in this river! Come out of the water!'

I cried out, fearing that I was doomed, and kicked with all my might. Whether it was because he was already wounded in the leg, or because he had only a weak footing on the riverbed I did not know, but he seemed to topple, dragging me down with him. Before I could tell what was happening, his grip was gone, I heard a cry, and I felt myself going over the falls. My momentum carried me well out into the air, and I slammed into the pool below with a force which knocked life from me. Things went dark for a moment, and my mouth filled with water again. I recovered, coughed, and tried to swim. Suddenly I sank for a few feet before, caught in the current, I hit the bottom with a painful thump. In an agony of breathlessness now, I somehow untangled myself from the flow of the water.

I awoke on the edge of the pool. It was perhaps a minute later. My arms and legs felt as if they'd been torn from their sockets, and it was a while before I could move or even think. It was still afternoon, and the sky was lighter overhead: I could see a little cloud, but I could hear nothing except the falls thundering into the pool.

I realised that I could not breathe properly, but somehow I

managed to drag myself further ashore.

There lay the Giant, senseless, and I wondered if he were dead. He was bleeding from his leg where my sword had cut him. I had never seen so much blood before. He was not a spectre, then, a formless phantom out of the Haunted Wood—he was real, and had real blood. But he was not of Shand, or not like any man of Shand that I had seen.

I lay there for some time, unable to move. It did not seem as though any of my bones were broken, but I felt terribly bruised. The day grew older, the clouds disappeared, and I saw that the falls were not really very high—twenty or thirty feet, I thought, looking up at them from the riverbank. Their water plunged into a pool about forty feet across, then swirled away south into more woods. Tall, green trees grew all about them.

Slowly I felt my strength return. After what seemed like hours, I found I could move my arms, and, using them, I crawled further up the bank. The Giant had not stirred, but I could see that he was still breathing. A small chaffinch watched me as I painfully sat up and leaned against a rock. Suddenly the chaffinch was gone. A whispering call came to me from the trees some yards away.

‘Ryna? Ryna! Oh, please, please don’t be dead!’

‘Alina!’ I croaked—my voice was cracked and dry. ‘Alina! Over here!’

Alina emerged at last from the trees and came to me quickly, but drew back with a cry when she saw the huge bulk of the Giant’s body nearby.

‘Alina! Oh, Alina, I ache—fetch me water,’ I moaned. Alina cupped her hands and brought me water from the pool

drop by drop. Then she bit off pieces of apple and fed them to me one by one until I felt a great deal better.

‘What are we to do?’ said Alina at last. ‘Is it dead?’

‘He is not,’ I said. ‘But he is hurt, I think. Go and fetch the horses.’

Alina did so, and while she was gone I crawled over to the Giant’s body and listened at his massive chest for the beat of his heart. I now saw, by the light of the westering sun, that his skin was in fact darker than that of the men of Restonia, but not grey like a Shadowed Man’s skin—he was brown, and his face was hard, as though he had seen and done many hard things. I realised I had never looked closely on the face of any man. He seemed stern, grim—unlike the men I knew, who, I thought, were for the most part soft and unused to the ways of war. I did not wish to look for long on his scar-closed eye. Taking my own tunic, which had been torn somehow as I had plummeted over the falls, I ripped off a strip and bathed his head. He seemed deeply asleep. I bent over him, almost daring to touch his face with my lips, when suddenly my hand was caught in his and his eye opened.

‘What are you doing?’ he said fiercely.

‘Nothing!’ I replied. ‘Lie still! You are hurt.’

The Giant let his head, which he had tried to raise, fall back.

‘You must rest while my friend and I tend your wounds,’ I said gently. He let go of my hand.

‘At least my blood is the same colour as yours, eh?’ he snarled, but a grim smile twisted his lips as he said it. He spoke with a twist in his words, too, as though he had but lately learned the speech of Shand.

I did not reply. I wondered why I had not simply taken my sword, which he still held in his other hand, and killed him. But I could see no reason for doing so, and wondered if indeed I had the strength to kill a man. I wondered greatly about him —since he was a man, what kind of man was he?

‘Who are you, Giant of Tarthos?’ I asked.

He turned his great head and looked at me.

‘I am not of Tarthos,’ he said.

‘So you have said,’ I went on, ‘but then where are you from?’

‘Let us say,’ he went on, ‘I am from far away.’

Alina came back with the horses, but would not come near when she saw that the Giant was awake until she was certain that he would not move. With wide eyes, she brought food, water and rags to me, and I instructed her to leave some for the Giant while I bound, as best as I could, his bleeding leg. My own body ached and throbbed by the time I had done, and by evening after we had all eaten and he had stopped bleeding, I collapsed against a stone and looked at him again. Alina stayed as far away as she could while remaining in hearing.

He watched my eyes, and spoke again without my asking.

‘I am of Turgal, which is far to the south and east of these lands. My name is Galatar.’

I paused and thought. I felt very weary. His unmoving eye rested on me. I was not sure what I should say or feel.

‘What is your name?’ he asked eventually. I told him.

‘I am of Restonia,’ I added, but even as I said it, it rang false. ‘And yet,’ I went on, ‘in truth, I do not have a home. Restonia is where I have dwelt for as long as I can

remember.'

'I also have no home,' replied Galatar. 'I have wandered far. But in all the lands I have journeyed in and through, I am a fugitive, and a stranger. I came here fleeing death. And I find a child with a sword waiting to kill me,' he said.

'I am no longer a child,' I said.

'No,' he replied, 'that is true.'

Galatar shifted his eye to the sky and pondered for a long while.

My head swam with his words. I had never heard much of lands so far away. My mind was full of the deserts and mountains and tall palaces and dark warriors of which songs sang.

The chaffinch which lived in the trees by the pool hopped onto a rock nearby and listened to us. We watched it for a while, and I thought of the green farmland of the valley, and the great peace of the fields which surrounded us. As I did so, I felt a sudden weariness come over me, and without another thought I sank into a deep, dreamless and healing sleep. Galatar stood, and Alina fled and hid behind a tree. The Giant did not heed her, but watched as the evening drew on and the sun went down behind the hills of Shand. Eventually, even Alina fell into a fitful sleep on the grass as a pale moon rose over the falls and turned that whole pool into a rippling silver mirror. But Galatar stood in the same place, watching over us, and I did not learn his thoughts at that, our first meeting, till long afterwards.

The minstrels had it otherwise—they paint the great battle there was between us, and tell how I used my wits to bring him down and make him swear loyalty to me and to Shand.

They forget the weakness and folly of youth in their songs — but I do not begrudge them. Let the people be the judge. Now that I set down the truth in my own pen I will have no more quarrel with the makers of songs. Songs are true, after all, with a different truth than that which the mortal sun reveals.

UNTOLD TALES

*Then great Galatar, grim and grey-eyed,
Spoke of splendour and shores undreamed of,
A world wider and more wondrous than
Any there had thought, the lap of shadows,
Where darkness had drawn a dim veil down
Over the old Emperor and his children.*

-from The Song of Ryna

I awoke with a huge hand clasped over my mouth. My heart beat heavily and I wondered how he would kill me — for my first thought was that I had been betrayed. Ever the shadow of betrayal hung over me then, leaping first to my mind from some far past beyond the reach of my waking memory when it had seemed something or someone had stood between me and the light —but Galatar, a black shadow in the early dimness of dawn, signalled to me to be quiet, and then slowly released his grip and crept away into the trees, beckoning me to follow.

We clambered stiffly, and with much pain from our bruises, up the ferny hillside, wet with dew, crawling under branches and slipping on rocks, before we came out next to the Falls. Water poured over the cliff in a grey curtain. From there, I could see right down the valley of Tarthos. A few lingering stars still shone overhead.

‘What’s happening?’ I whispered. ‘Where’s Alina? Why must we be quiet?’

Galatar spoke in a heavier whisper, keeping low to the

ground and signing to me to do the same. I crouched behind a rock.

‘Look,’ he said.

I looked over the edge of the rock in the direction he was pointing. Far down in the valley, where the river curved south, and where the forest came down almost to its edge, I could just make out in the half-light seven dark horses drinking. At first I could not see any riders, but as I stared I saw them: seven tall, cloaked figures standing about by the water’s edge.

‘Who are they?’ I whispered, shivering.

‘Carthogs. I have been watching them for an hour. They do not yet know that we are here,’ replied Galatar. ‘Your friend is away behind the mill with the horses. You need to go to her. If you do not see me before the sun shines down over the treetops, you must ride as fast as you can to your king and warn him.’

‘Warn?’

‘Yes. This is a hunting party—but more may follow. They are spying out the land for their quarry. Your people must be armed and ready.’

I shook with cold.

‘Are they... Shadowed Men?’ I asked fearfully.

‘Yes. That is what Carthogs are. They serve evil.’

‘But here? In the heart of Restonia? I saw one once but he was dead, and he was from the border country.’

‘Go,’ said Galatar.

‘But what are you going to do?’

‘I must meet them. It is I they seek.’

‘You? Why should they seek you?’

‘No more! Ride and tell your king that seven Carthogs are in the valley of Tarthos —unless I appear to you before sunrise, you will be the only warning he will get.’

I was too afraid to protest further. I crept away from the falls and ran back to the trees behind the mill where I found Alina trembling and half-weeping with the horses.

‘Ryna! Oh, Ryna, it’s like a nightmare!’ cried Alina.

‘Quiet! Let’s be ready to ride,’ I said.

We sat on the horses, looking out through the trees down into the valley. We could see nothing but the grey mill, the trees, the open glade, the river —and, as the birds began to sing, the only other noise was the roar of the river. Time crept slowly by. The remaining stars faded and were gone. The sky grew lighter. I realised I felt stiff and very hungry, and my thigh ached badly where I had tumbled over the Falls, but I hardly dared to move. The tips of the tallest trees began to glow with sunlight.

Suddenly, Galatar came climbing quickly up the hill, his sword unsheathed in his hand. He was carrying something in his other hand. In a few moments he was with us under the trees, breathless. His sword was covered in dark blood, and he had blood on his jerkin. The bandage on his leg had worked loose.

‘Let us ride,’ he said.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Four Carthogs lie dead by the riverside,’ he explained as he mounted one of the spare horses, ‘but three ride south through the woods. Your king must be told, and quickly.’

I dismissed all from my mind then but the ride back to Helca’s Castle. We shot out from under the trees at full

gallop, and were on the road home before the sun struck them. We rode hard for what seemed like hours, and even Alina forgot how hungry she was or how tired, until we came at last to the villages we knew well and turned south-east on the road to the castle. People on the road gasped in astonishment as we rode by —two young maidens and a giant, riding like the wind.

Great was the commotion when we rode back into the gate of Helca's Castle later that day. The King himself came down to the courtyard, and when he saw us, he was unsure whether to scold me, or be astonished, or outraged, or merely joyful. For when no messenger had come to explain our long absence, Helca had been forced to conclude that something had happened on the road to Alina and myself, and he had been preparing riders to go out and seek for us. But now I sat before him on my horse, tunic torn, wild-looking, with a giant warrior behind me on another mount, while Alina sat on her pony and led the fourth beast, trying to keep out of the way, and Helca could do nothing but stand dumbfounded and stare at us all. We were weary, dusty, and looked hungry and out of breath, but in my pride I savoured that moment.

'What is the meaning of this, Ryna?' he said. People began to gather around us from the village and surrounding fields —rumour had travelled fast.

'Sire,' I said, 'I bring you Galatar of Turgal, he whom I called the Giant of Tarthos.'

The giant dismounted and sank heavily to his knees. He presented to the King the bundle which he had carried back with him under a cloak. I did not at first recognise it when he

uncloaked it and held it up. Then I felt suddenly sick when I saw what it was: the severed head of a man, with a dark, horned helmet, trimmed with bright red and gold.

‘Sire, I bring you both atonement for my intrusion, and warning: four Carthogs lie dead by the mill at Tarthos, but three escaped my sword and ride south to meet their masters.’

Galatar then winced with pain and gripped his leg. I dismounted and went to him.

Helca could find no words. A huge crowd of nobles, townsfolk, children and farmers had gathered around — many of them had followed me and the others in along the road from Tarthos. They all waited for him to speak.

‘What say you, Galatar of Turgal? How come you here?’ he said at last.

‘Your highness, I come to these lands as a fugitive, without leave —but bear witness to my deeds against your enemies. And let it be known amongst ye all, that if this, a child of your kingdom who is a child no longer, possesses half the courage of one of your full-grown knights, then this must be a noble land indeed, and such service as I can give will be no dishonour to me.’

So saying, Galatar stood with difficulty, and unsheathed his large sword. Bending down, he struck it hard on the stones of the courtyard and sparks leapt up about it. Then suddenly, to the great gasp of all those who watched, the blade burst into flames and burned steadily as he held it aloft and spoke in a loud voice:

‘Behold, Agrator, greatest of the Fireblades of Turgal. I pledge it to the service of this realm and offer that service to

your king!’

And he swung it around, but its flames did not die. The whole crowd watched in awe and silence.

‘If your word is true, Galatar, then you are welcome,’ said Helca. ‘But there is a tale here worthy of a proper telling. Let me then answer these matters in due course, when we have feasted and we have heard the story of these wonders.’

We made our way to the Great Hall, where the evening’s feast was being prepared, and places were made for us at the King’s table—but a large log had to be found for Galatar, for no chair in the hall would support him. And at my bidding, nurses were called and the Giant’s wounds were bathed—and then I and Alina bathed ourselves, for we were weary and grimy with the road—and I wondered when I had last eaten, for the events of those two days were jumbled in my mind, and seemed like those of a year, compressed.

Helca then heard our tale: I told it all, for Alina was too frightened to speak and Galatar was the guest there. But I told the story in such a way that my folly and my pride were in part concealed, and when I had finished, the King and all his courtiers sat astonished. Only old Visaeon smiled to himself.

‘How old are you, Ryna?’ asked the King.

‘Sixteen summers in a month’s time, sire,’ I told him.

Helca looked around the table.

‘What am I to do, my friends? For here is but a slip of a girl, albeit trained with a sword as a boy would be at her age like the warrior-queens of Valadria, through the foresight or foolishness of her master: and yet her deed is unquestionably courageous. Should she be rebuked or rewarded?’

No one spoke. Then Visaeon looked up from his meal, in which he had been slower than the others, and spoke:

‘I shall say more on this anon.’

Helca nodded. And, hearing the Giant’s story, he ordered his lords to at once dispatch riders warning the south and calling upon all who had arms to bear them in readiness. Long had it been since a Shadowed Man had been seen so deep in Restonia. All who sat at that table were both grim with the news and amazed at the deeds they heard tell of. But when Galatar was commanded to speak, he said little — the King forgave him his trespass, but he would still say only that he was a fugitive from the evil in Turgal, and no one dared ask him more, or about the wound that had almost closed his eye.

Several days passed in which I did nothing but rest and tend the Giant, who, for my part, I began to see as a friend, for here was someone as much a stranger in that realm as I — but he seemed always quiet, even after his leg had almost healed, and I dared not ask him too many questions. He rested in a plain and simple room, his sword close by him, staring at times at the little square of the sky he could see beyond the small window. Alina recovered from her ordeal almost at once, and began to add her own colour to our adventures for anyone who would listen, never expanding upon her own part but adding great deeds of heroism to my story, and horrible deeds of grisly terror to the story of the Giant, planting the seeds of songs.

Looking out from the battlements one dawn as I had done only a few days before, I was astonished that the world still

looked and acted the same as it had always done: the sun, rising in the east through banks of cloud, shone with the same light; farmers came and went on the roads below; the trees swayed in the early breeze. I looked out south and west, but could see no advancing armies. It was almost as though the whole thing had been a dream. Yet Helca had made me welcome as a warrior, though not yet a member of the Crimson Company —I was permitted to choose my own horse from the best of the King's, and wear armour openly as the women of Valadria do, and the ways of the Castle were open to me. For a while I had enjoyed this, but after a few days, when riders came back saying that no trace of the other Carthogs could be found, but that four dead ones had indeed been discovered by the river in Tarthos valley, and when the lords of the south sent word that their people were ready, but no army rode up from the Middle Lands to meet them, I wondered what I was now meant to do, and whether being a knight of the Company was what I had wanted after all.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and started —old Visaeon had crept up the stairs to the battlements and stood beside me.

'Life is strange, is it not, child?' he said gently. I moved to let him sit by me, and he sat on the stone with the groan of one who has lived for many years.

He looked out at the fields under the growing light.

'Here we are, far from the dark places of this world —and yet you are now a doer of deeds, and I an old warrior, accounted wise in the ways of men. But what is there for us to do now but wait?'

He was silent for a while. Two crows curved in a wide

circle around the tower and headed for the forest.

‘Did you know,’ he began suddenly, tapping my arm, ‘that Barragath the smith has joined the Company? And that Helca has appointed Cundria of Valadria too? She came from the North but two days ago. The Lord Reskille’s son Damielle wanted to join, being sixteen this winter, but as his father told him, great deeds are required for one so foolhardy as to be a knight who wears the Crimson.’

‘Foolhardy?’ I asked, looking up at him. The old man had always been kind to me, but had never before sought me out or spoken to me like this.

‘Aye, lass. Only fools would take on such a burden.’

‘What burden, lord?’

‘Do you not yet feel it? The burden of having to do something. Do you think Alina feels that? Or Horrinn? Or any of the other youngsters? Why, there are many who account themselves warriors and noblemen, and men-at-arms, and commanders, who have not taken on such a burden, and probably never will. For here you are, and I —and we wait for something to happen that we may know what we are to do. But who down there in the village waits? They already know the pattern of their lives. No, we are the fools, we who take on the burdens of destiny —do you not think so?’

I did not reply for some time. The wind grew blustery and plucked at the banners of the castle as the sun rose higher.

‘Lord —is that what it means to be a knight of the Crimson Company?’ I said after a while.

‘What else? Otherwise, why wear fancy colours or ride great horses, or swing swords? Some do these things, of course, not feeling that burden at all —but you are not one of

them, or you would not be up here looking out on the world this morning.'

I turned to look in the old man's eyes, but Visaeon had turned away to watch a flock of birds rise from the woods below.

'Lord,' I said suddenly, 'who am I? And what am I to do? You have been my guardian all my life, but you are not my father. Who was my father?'

'Ryna,' said Visaeon, looking in my eyes —and he spoke in the High Tongue, that way of speech reserved for the poets and warriors, 'I truly do not know the answers to any of these questions. But I can tell thee what I do know. Thou art not of Restonia. And there is in thee, I feel, a greatness, waiting only for a time to reveal itself. Perhaps it never shall. Today thou and I must speak with the King, and there I shall say more on this. And I hope dearly that thou wilt forgive me for not speaking sooner. But for now, I am an old man and I need my food in the mornings.'

He got up and hobbled to the stair, with me supporting him, and together we went down to breakfast in the great hall.

That night a gathering was called by the King: and there came the Lord Visaeon, and Lord Reskille, and other nobles of the realm, and Cundria of Valadria, and Barragath, and the other members of the new-born Crimson Company; and also there was Galatar and I, and some faces I did not know, visitors to Helca's Castle from even further afield.

We sat around the table in the King's chambers, with a fire burning in the hearth and wine in our silver goblets, and I

looked at them —but their faces were all grim and their eyes dark, for the King had called them together as a council of war, and there had not been war in Restonia for longer than any of them could remember.

Cundria was a tall, young, white-haired woman, wearing a white cloak of some rich fur, bearing a sword and armour, as was the Valadrian fashion. She had answered Helca's call for knights for the Crimson Company, and ridden south from the land of her birth as soon as she had heard his proclamation. The people of Valadria were stern and strong, and their womenfolk were as swordcrafty and mighty in war as the men. But even in Valadria, where the cold north wind shrieked across the open moorlands of Hethrian, war was long-distant, and Cundria's sword had never seen true battle. She looked on me strangely, though, and I avoided her eyes.

Barragath was a smith of Restonia, black-bearded and hearty in laughter but also strong of arm and skilful with both sword, and his own preferred weapon, a huge steel hammer which he carried hung from his belt. He had joined the Company while I had been at Tarthos, for his family had been killed cruelly in a raid on the border by horsemen from the Middle Lands, where, it seemed, Turgalin warriors now roamed doing evil —and he scowled at Galatar, who sat silent across from him at the table.

Both Barragath and Cundria had proven themselves worthy to be knights of the Company by previous deeds of arms. Helca had also decided that Galatar should sit at the council, despite the frowns of some there, as he had allied his sword to Restonia's cause and also because, being recently travelled, he might bring useful news or knowledge of events

in the Middle Lands and elsewhere. And many there were keen to know his story. Thus, Helca made him speak first, and Galatar stood to tell his tale—but Barragath interrupted him.

‘My King, I have sat here and heard your reasons and this giant’s tale as to why he sits at this table—but I still cannot see why he is permitted to know our innermost counsels when what we know of his deeds tells us that he has proven himself a traitor to his own homeland. What then if he proves equally unloyal to our cause?’

Helca looked at Galatar, who had not moved or blinked or shown any sign that he had heard Barragath’s words at all.

‘Some of my people, as you see, Turgalin, are not yet satisfied with you,’ he said.

‘No more would I expect them to be, sire,’ said the giant warrior, his gaze drifting from face to face, ‘for in their place I would no doubt think the same. I came to this land fleeing from hunters, for I am a fugitive from treachery of the most evil kind, a treachery which has betrayed a whole realm to evil and even as I speak, extinguishes lives and hopes by the thousand. But I remain loyal to that which is true of Turgal, and that which is good in all realms of men, before he whom you call Raendu. And in time, my vengeance shall come. This is my tale, in brief.’

He spoke slowly and steadily, his strange accent lending weight and certainty to his words.

‘By my sword shall ye know me,’ said Galatar, and he unsheathed it and lay it before us all on the table. It was still and unburning now, but many remembered its flames at the gate some days before. ‘This, as I said when I came, is

Agrator —and it is the greatest of seven swords made in the deeps of time, and borne in war through the ages by the royal houses of Turgal.

‘Turgal is a wide land, very wide, and very far from here. Many mountains must be crossed to reach it; many rivers forded; many leagues traversed. Yet Turgal itself is perhaps the greatest of the realms of Gandria —from the west, where the forests are uncharted, and where the marshes lie across the roads, to the distant east where the Sun dwells; from the shores of the sea in the north to the deserts of the south, and beyond those deserts to where the sky itself is changed and they say that Raendu’s Dream is different —within these bounds, a thousand, thousand mortals live and toil under the protection of the Emperor, working the lands as the stars wheel over their heads.

‘At the centre of Turgal rises the great mountain called Thorondimar: two black peaks of rock that curve out like the bones of the earth revealed —the Cracked Thorn, it would be called in your tongue. Here, under the shadow of the ancient stone, the Emperor of Turgal sits in judgement, and the city of Thorondimar-Maslak has grown until all those hills are full of the songs and sorrows of mortals. Golden is his hall, and more splendid than any in the world; white are its towers, but the sun itself is caught in the wonder of its roof. There came the people of Turgal through the long years, seeking the mercy and judgement of their ruler, and there beat the heart of the realm, for the peak of Thorondimar was worshipped as one of the homes of Raendu in ages past, and it was held sacred, and all the life of the land formed around it as the rim of a wheel forms around its hub. And mercy and

judgement they found, for the most part, and many an age crept by with no darkening of those golden roofs or white walls.

‘But in the time of Ranatar the Emperor, who sits now on the Seat of the Sun in Thorondimar-Maslak, the darkness threw its net. Ambassadors came from the north, from the Dark Isles over the sea, promising cures for the plague that had swept through the land, and many other things besides —and, because they seemed fair and because there was a need, many forgot the lessons of the past and the tales of dread that were told about those islands, and welcomed these sweet-speaking folk. In time, Ranatar himself, though he proclaimed himself free from their honeyed spells, was swayed by them, and his many judgements began to weigh in favour of the north: first through trade, then through arms, then, as Ranatar descended into sloth and idleness, through slavery and worse things even than that. Such was the art of the deceivers that few suspected the source of the shadow that had fallen across the sun, yet before long Turgal groaned under the burden of tyranny: the Emperor saw the people no more, and the calls for mercy were answered with swords — for the fair-speakers from the Dark Isles had brought new ways of war to the eager youth of the land, and strong potions that aided strength in deeds of prowess, and before long a new breed of warriors had grown into a powerful force in the land: the Wildwards they called them, and they were rash and untouchable, for at their head rode Baladac, Prince of Turgal, younger son of Ranatar. Evil then went unpunished; sorrow came in an ever-mounting wave. The peoples of Turgal grew apart, and some sold others into

slavery, and there was war, and the Wildweards revelled in it, and their swords were red.

‘Then the ambassadors who had come among the nobles of Turgal and been made Lords of the Realm by Ranatar, sent new whisperings abroad of the great wealth that lay in the west, untouched, unclaimed, unguarded save by the uncouth folk who dwelt there, far from the Emperor’s mercy. And war abroad then seemed to Ranatar better than war at home, and he amassed many hosts, and set Wildweard commanders at their heads, and they sailed to Tara and to the Middle Lands with Baladac their prince, under the guidance of the Dark Isles, and war came to the lands that you know.

‘This was but a short while ago as things are reckoned, but a long age of misery as things are felt —for, while war raged in the west, the Emperor, under the words of the Lords he had welcomed, cruelly scourged his realm, seeking slaves and peace in his own mind. Slaves he found aplenty, and the mines and fields of the Dark Isles profited; peace he did not find, for many in the far corners of Turgal rose up against the darkness and refused his edicts. But their lands were scattered across deserts and mountains larger than your whole kingdom, sire, and they had no leader. Thus were they divided and the Emperor’s Guard rode at them one by one and put them to the sword.

‘But then the Emperor’s eldest son stood before him and defied him, saying that he would cleanse the Seat of the Sun of innocent blood and restore glory and honour to Turgal — and the Dark Isles’ lords spat and cursed, and Baladac, returning from his wars, fought with his brother and almost put out his eye with a hot iron, casting him out of the city.

But the outcast despaired not, and came to the place of the rebels, and they found in him their leader, and around his great sword they rallied. But, even as he rode back to the city of his father, the Heir of Turgal was betrayed, and discovered alone, and pursued by Shadowed Men from the Dark Isles until he fled even over the borders of the land to escape them, flying from peril into peril, and from the war within to the war without.

‘And so you see, your majesty, and my lords and ladies, that the strife of other lands has come to your door—but that with it comes hope. For if Ranatar were to be brought back into the light and the justice of Turgal restored, a great part of the woes of the west would be relieved. It is with this hope that I stand now before you. Great hosts await in Turgal for a sign and a leader and the Sword of Fire to rally around. If the rightful prince of that land were to return, perhaps the balance that now swings so terribly to evil would be arighted. Baladac knows this; his masters in the Dark Isles know it: and they tremble in their knowledge.’

Then he stood even taller before the Council, and said:

‘For I am Galatar, son of Ranatar, Rightful Heir to the Seat of the Sun in Thorondimar-Maslak the Golden City, and this, as I have said, is Agrator the Fireblade of Turgal, which cries out for vengeance.’

There was a long silence. Galatar resheathed Agrator, and I felt the great dark hand of destiny that lay on him then—perhaps the first time that I had felt that shadow in another. But I said nothing.

‘And thus are you pursued,’ said Helca at last. ‘Across many leagues have your hunters come, and they take many

risks for your head.'

'Not only gold would be given to any that bore it back to Baladac, for while I live he dies a slow death of fear,' said Galatar.

Barragath nodded then, and said, 'Then I am satisfied — and any who cause the enemy to tremble are welcome here. Now indeed we perceive some light in the darkness.'

Galatar nodded back to him.

'And we see then,' said Helca, 'how our council takes shape around hope, as a hand grips the hilt of a sword — for if Galatar here could be brought to the throne that is his destiny, all the west would be released from the onslaught of the Turgalins.'

'Aye, my lord,' said Visaeon. 'But many leagues and many swords lie between us and that place. And the throne is still occupied by its Emperor.'

Helca nodded and they all fell silent again. I felt Barragath's gaze on me then. He said:

'Then what of this girl? I mean no disrespect to the flower of her beauty or her honour, but I have yet to hear why she is permitted to sit here.'

Old Lord Visaeon then spoke again. Such was the respect which he had earned through all the grey reign of the Queen Seleca that all there turned to listen carefully to him.

'It is on my advice that our King reckons Ryna among our number, for not only did she offer first her arm for the trials of the Crimson Company, when others were forestalled, nor does she sit among us only for her deed in finding this prince of Turgal in our midst: in her, there is also a great destiny at work. And, if I may, I will now tell what I know of this, for it

will serve both to allay noble Barragath's fears, and to put our minds towards other matters which have summoned us together: for there is more than one strand to this tapestry, and in seeing one we may follow clearly the other.'

I had been overawed in the presence of these lords and warriors, dazzled by Galatar's tale, silenced by the weight of policies and heavy words that hung in that room—but now I sat forward in a strange wonder and listened. My own life suddenly hung on the thread of this old man's words, as though it were a jewelled bauble brought out into the sunlight for all to see. I swallowed my anxiety.

'My Lords and friends of the realm, know you that it was on a winter's night, during a storm, in the twenty-seventh year of the reign of Queen Seleca, fifteen summers ago, as I rode home from the borders and Lord Reskille's castle at Tirith's Bridge, when there came to me out of the rain and the darkness a cloaked figure, carrying a bundle, sheltered from the rain.

'And I stopped, for though I feared evil, seeing that this shape had risen like a phantom from the shadows of the Haunted Wood which there grows close beside the lonely road, the figure put up its hand, signalling peace—and I sensed a power there that stilled my heart. Then the hooded one came up to me and spoke, saying:

"Hold, Visaeon of Restonia—I charge thee with a task," and, trembling, I dismounted. Then this tall man—for so he seemed—came close in the night and said: "Visaeon, know ye that I am of the Companions of the Wood, those who still follow the ancient ways and dwell therein, guardians of the trees and guarded by them. I bid thee take from me a burden

that mayhap in time will lighten thine own load and the loads of many.”

‘And I wondered greatly, for he showed to me then a babe, wrapped in white, with golden hair—a daughter like the girl-children of Restonia. But I looked at the guardian and he, seeing my eyes, said: “Nay, lord, fear not, this is no changeling or child of the Wood, but a daughter of thine own realm whom we have watched over since her untimely birth under the trees. And it is deemed time that she be returned to her own people—but guard her well, for in her is a kingly spirit that is destined to find or bear that which has long been looked for by men. Seek not to restrain the ways of Kings or Queens, Lord of Restonia, and maybe thou shalt see thyself he whom Raendu sends before thy dream is done!”

‘And I turned then to ask him more of this, but he was gone, into the rain-shadows as though I had but spoken to the wind—and I looked down into the eyes of the young girl-child, and there I saw the wilderness of that place whence she had come, and I named her Ryna, which in the ancient tongue means “Wild One.”

‘Then I swiftly returned to this castle and bade the women prepare fires and food, and they took the babe from me and nurtured her, and so she grew. But as she came to young womanhood, and showed her own hunger for the ways of the sword and the skills of men rather than of women, I did not gainsay her, heeding the words of the stranger, though I knew not their full meaning. And so it comes to this—for that, as I have said, was nigh on fifteen years ago.’

The old lord sat down.

All eyes were on me, but I stared at the floor. I pictured the

scene all those years ago by the roadside in the rain, but I could feel nothing. It was as though the unspoken questions I had posed to myself all my life sat now upon a knife-edge, and if I moved or spoke the moment in which they might be answered would be gone forever.

‘What then are we to make of this?’ said Helca after a long pause. ‘What do we know of these Companions of the Wood? Are they friends or foes of our realm?’

‘My lord,’ said Visaeon, ‘it is said that many years ago, when the first ships came from the east bearing men from the Westbane that took the living light from the world, great realms were established, and that one of these lay in the forest which we now call the Haunted Wood. And that was before Shand began.’

‘But all know that the Wood is evil and infested with the spirits of darkness!’ said Barragath. ‘Does not the Black Vale lie within? Did not Valkurn, the High King of legend, become bewitched there?’

‘These things also are said, and the old tales are many, and not all of them are true —but the Wood of Seven is large enough for many tales, true and untrue, for it stretches from the foothills of the Mountains of Morning in the east to the banks of the Shandbound River in the south. Many dark things dwell therein, the tales say, and many not so dark,’ replied Visaeon. ‘For myself, I would say that the man who gave me the child was not evil, but in other lands of men would be accounted great.’

‘And yet there are tales of changelings and worse things from that place that I have heard from my youth,’ said Barragath, looking askance at me. I could not budge my eyes

from the floor, frozen as I was in these unanswered mysteries. I did not fully listen to any word the smith spoke. 'How are we to judge these matters?' he said.

'As we must,' said Helca calmly, 'and by the light of the same sun and moon which swing above wood and water, wheresoe'er they may be, and whatsoe'er dwells in them. It is plain that great things are afoot here, things which may involve the destiny of this whole realm and perhaps beyond. Of those things that we know with some certainty, the most pressing for Restonia are the presence of the Carthogs in the land, and the massing of the enemy hosts along the south, in the Middle Lands. What are we to do in these matters? And what part should Ryna then play in this, our immediate concern? For though I heed your words, Visaeon, and they are strange indeed, my mind as King is taken up with this, and I do not yet see the strand by which your tale weaves into the larger frame.'

Visaeon nodded.

'Then let us debate these other matters,' he said, 'and maybe we shall see that which for now remains invisible.'

'I say that we gather our swords and march out to meet the enemy with steel and fire,' said Cundria, a flame flashing in her blue eyes. 'And I for one welcome the strength of this giant among men, who lends us not only his cause but his great might,' she added, looking at Galatar, who remained steadfastly silent, glancing at me as I sat listening. I felt I wandered in a dream or trance and that the talking went on without me: I had vanished from the room. The voices now seemed distant, but clear, like the voices in a story.

'Would that this would bring us to a lasting peace, lady of

Valadria,' Helca replied, 'but, as we now have confirmed by our guest that which the emissaries and our own scouts have reported, the enemy's strength in the Middle Lands is far greater than our own. This land is not used to war —its swords have rusted, the skills of its warriors have been lost. In better times these are things of which we might be proud, for war is a great horror —but with evil afoot in other parts of the world, this now places us in great peril. We could at best amass ten thousand horse, and most of those would need arms re-forged or newly made. Valuable time has been lost in my mother's folly, and Restonia now stands, by chance or by design, as the weak underbelly of Shand, which the enemy stands ready to strike.'

'What counsel is then to be offered to us?' said Barragath. He was a plain man, I could see, a smith of great skill, and of some ability with a sword, war-hammer and bow — enchantments and talk of great destiny he left to others. He was growing frustrated with the continuing debate. Outside the stars twinkled in a sky that showed black through the unshuttered windows.

'It was my hope,' began Helca, 'that in establishing the Crimson Company as a body of knights, we could at least defend the borders of the realm from the encroachment of evil. And this may be the case, for a while —but Galatar brings word of events in distant lands which echo across the mountains even to our walls. And his recent passage through the Middle Lands, where our own folk have mostly ceased to go, darkens our horizons. It seems to me that defence is no longer enough —but I cannot yet clearly see another course.'

'Then there remains the unclear course which opens to us,'

said Visaeon, raising his grey head from his chest where it had seemed he had dozed. 'Not lightly did I tell all tonight of that which I have hidden from the girl herself until now, for which she may forever hold herself aggrieved, and for which I can only beg her forgiveness. I withheld it so not knowing the time when all should be told —but that I deemed was now. There are matters beyond our small table here —we can only move them insofar as we are able to see. After that it will be up to others, maybe far from here, to do the rest.'

'What is your counsel then, lord?' said Barragath. 'Would you have us abandon ourselves to faith in the destiny of a girl? Think you that if we put her at the head of an army the enemy will quail and creep home?'

Visaeon shook his head.

'Nay, rash Barragath,' he said after a moment. 'Destiny embraces us all. We are abandoned to it at birth. Our task is merely to grow with it or to defy it if we can. In one lies hope; in the other, wasted strength and eventual despair. Our task here is to read which way lies growth, which way defiance.'

'Could we not send for aid from Miria, from the South Vale, and from my own land of Valadria?' said Cundria. 'For there many thousands are armed and horsed, growing as the rumours of war in the south grow. Could we not then meet the enemy in open battle?'

'Indeed, it is so,' said Helca, turning to her. 'I have sent messengers forth to your King Raegarath, and to Queen Wirrin of Miria, and here at our table sits Ulforth of the Lords of the South Vale as their ambassador, just recently arrived in our realm. But from all these princes I hear the same —

rumours on their own borders, and a shadow which restrains them from sending out their arms without a clear plan with which we may triumph once and for all. For there seems no centre to this evil that besets us, and which threatens to end the Secondpeace of Shand after a thousand years. All our kingdoms are beset by foes, but no one foe rides at their head: in the Middle Lands we hear of Turgalin invaders; from Tara over the mountains and from Greybold's Wain where Reagarth of Valadria rules we hear of Reavers from the dreaded Eastern Isles; in the west they tell of phantoms and shadows and terrible plagues, and speak of the great darkness that was long ago locked behind the Wall. In the tales that we know, whenever evil struck it had a face, and the great heroes of the past could ride out against it in boldness and surety —now we tremble at shadows too vague to oppose. If this evil had a head we could strike it off; but it is either headless and pervasive as a plague or as many-headed as a beast of the Underworld. Would that a single sword could end this nightmare of creeping poison!

And as Helca finished speaking he flung his goblet into the fire and I, startled, saw his fury and the weight that he bore as the king of a realm besieged by a darkness that neither he nor anyone could fully understand, it seemed. At that very moment he seemed like me, and my woe seemed a smaller thing. So for the second time I saw the shadow of the unknown that I had felt often in my own heart lying on another's, and I wondered. Was life indeed as simple as I had believed?

'Who then is wise enough to answer this riddle for us?' said Ulforth after a while, as they watched the fire crackle

and lick at the silver goblet with its thirsty tongues, and listened to the hiss of the wine on the coals.

‘I have never claimed wisdom,’ Visaeon began, ‘but I am perhaps old enough for what I have seen through the long years to have some worth. And some things remain certain even in the tossing sea of doubts that beset us. One is this: that though no clear evil proclaims itself at the head of these many evils about us, it is the nature of evil that it has a source, as a river has a spring. Therefore, looking for that source and placing one’s swordblade there would seem to be the least wasted of deeds. And if old tales are told for wisdom as well as wonder, the sources of evil in this wide world are limited in number, however much it may seem otherwise. We must remember that it is a device of evil to disguise its face with many faces, just as the weak who seek to envenom the strong must lend their poison strength with guile, lest they be discovered and cast out. Our friend Galatar the Giant has spoken of evil and treachery even in far Turgal—but does not this evil have a source?’

‘Aye, lord,’ nodded Galatar. ‘That which has destroyed the honour of my realm came stealthily and in guises of peace, but clearly it came from those islands which lay to the north of our long shores. There, it is said, men have shadowed souls and worship evil—and this I have seen, for Carthogs hunted me from Turgal, and I have looked in their faces in the deep of the night.’

I shivered. I had been still for so long that it seemed the blood had frozen in my arms. Since I myself had looked upon the dead visage of a Shadowed Man, and now had seen their dark forms in the dawnlight of the Tarthos valley, I had

no desire to see their living faces. Visaeon went on:

‘And the Turgalins which sit now unwelcome in the Middle Lands were driven there thusly by that evil which they have foolishly welcomed, it seems, into their own land, an evil we now know has at least one head, that of Baladac, Prince of Turgal. Likewise, the Reavers who harass Tara and the North come from those islands. I know not of the plagues and phantoms of the West. Long has Fretravorn been locked against the passage of evil —but who knows? Perhaps the arm of those who dwell in the Dark Isles can now reach even over the Great Wall?’

‘But let me understand you aright, lord,’ said Barragath. ‘Are you saying that what seems a general wickedness and decline in all the lands we know actually has a mind and hand at its helm? And that this mind has a head —and that this head lies in the Dark Isles?’

Visaeon nodded slowly.

‘This is what I say only,’ he said, ‘for of all here I am the oldest, and the most learned in the old tales —but the eyes of an old man can lead him astray. It may not be so in fact.’

‘Often have you disclaimed your wisdom, Visaeon,’ said Helca, ‘when all know here that it has been your hand that has kept Restonia free even when my mother fell under the shadow. Indeed, it was you, not I, who suggested that I reform the Crimson Company of old as a spearhead against our woes. I did not expect you to kneel before me as its first knight, but was hardly surprised by the deed. But having this spearhead, where should we throw it? Do you now suggest an assault on the Dark Isles themselves?’

‘Lord King, I only know that which I have spoken tonight,’

Visaeon said. 'The Company would seem not strong enough to make such an assault —and yet Valkurn found his way to the Underhall and slew the Serpent King and Queen alone and armed only with a golden sword, so it is not mete for me to say whether such an assault would succeed or fail. Perhaps the freedom of all the lands of men has come to an end, and that under the light of Raendu's Star the time has come for evil to conquer all. We cannot read that which is yet to be —we can only do what we must.

'But the tales tell us that deep in the Citadel of the Four Winds, on the island of Wormstone in the east, there burns a great fire in a pit —and that place is called the Firevault, and from it, and from the idol of Gon-runin that stands deep in the darkness of that place, comes the strange and evil power which gives the Dark Circle its mastery over things beyond mortal ken. And there, they say, lurks the Dragonlord himself, master of the Morndred, his brood of servants. We have no Valkurn to journey there, nor his Golden Sword, but we are not without hope. We know that the rightful heir of Turgal sits in our midst; and I have already spoken of the tall Companion from the Haunted Wood and his words, and his burden: the burden that he said may lighten other burdens in time.'

'Then what must we do?' said Barragath, impatient with words, but chilled, I could see, by the old man's words. I had never before heard of anything as dark as this, and cold fingers gripped my heart: only the darkest of songs spoke of Wormstone and the Citadel of the Four Winds.

'Find a way to bring Galatar to his throne,' said Visaeon, 'though all the hosts of Turgal and the Dark Isles stand

between —and discover the meaning of the words of the Companion of the Wood.'

'Where would we find such meaning? Who among mortals could guide us?' asked Helca.

'Who indeed? One only that I know, since the last Herald of Raendu departed from the world long ago,' said Visaeon. 'They say that to the south, hidden in the heart of tall mountains, lies a secret place. Wenfold it is called in the tongue of Shand, but perhaps that is not its only name. There they say much wisdom dwells —not the wisdom of the memories of men, which are short, but the older wisdom from before the realms we know, the ancient knowledge, written in vast books the like of which none at this table have seen. There, it seems, lies our road, or some of it. And Wenfold could be made to lie on the stealthful road to Turgal, where Galatar must come.'

The lords and ladies absorbed the old man's words. A quest, I thought —to bring Galatar to his chance, and to unravel my life. But who would be the questers?

Helca thought for a long while. I could see that Visaeon was reluctant to say more: indeed, perhaps the old man had no more to say. I felt that somehow the answer was plain, but too simple to be spoken. I raised my head. I spoke the fated words that have led me even now to where I sit:

'I say that the Crimson Company must ride forth and seek the source of our woes, east or west. For sitting here we wait only for that woe to come to us —and if all we can do is send a few knights into the wilderness in hope, then let us do that, rather than ponder on death only. I would rather have hope than death, young though I might be. And I know nothing of

destiny, whether it be mine or another's, but I can see when the sun shines and feel my way in the dark when it does not—and I have a hankering to do great deeds before I reach my lord's long years. Therefore, whether I am a knight of the Company or not, I shall ride with it to Wenfold, and let others look to the defence of the realm, and trust in Raendu.'

My voice and words sounded light and very young indeed in that firelit room surrounded by all those lords and warriors, and I thought my eyes shone—but Visaeon smiled at me under his tired brows.

'And what happened next, Ryna? What did you say then?' Alina asked me as we sat in the cloisters the next morning. It was raining thinly, and a chill wind lingered in the corners of the old stone, but I was lost in a dream, wondering when I would wake.

'Not much after that. I don't think I spoke at all. They seemed to talk on and on about other things—mainly the numbers of men that each part of the land could muster, I think, for not all the lords were happy with my words. They wanted to know about swords, and arms, and the defence of their lands. And Helca readily listened to them. That's the duty of a king, I suppose. But it was as though what I'd said freed their tongues.'

'I suppose they're all happy that someone else is going to ride out and go on a quest, while they can stay at home,' mused Alina. 'Oh, Ryna, are you really going to go away? I don't think my heart will bear it!'

I dismissed her words, but I knew my friend meant what she said, after her own fashion. We had been strangely

embarrassed to meet or talk much since the adventure with the Giant. Now Alina sat huddled at my feet, soaking up my every word as her gown soaked up the rain from the stones. The colder weather, and my need of a listening ear, had drawn us together again. I was as yet too young and blind to see love as a cause.

‘I wonder what other lands are like? I wonder —shall I see the Haunted Wood with my own eyes?’ I thought aloud — for my mind had often turned to it since Visaeon had told me his tale. My heart swelled to fill the gaps that his words had left. No daughter of Shadowed Folk, it seemed, but a babe from the Wood of Seven. I had tried to remember it that night, but sleep had taken me quickly, and I had had no dreams. Rather, it seemed to me then, waking was the dream. I had no trouble in forgiving the old lord for withholding the truth about my past: it was like a story about someone else. The Ryna I had been yesterday was gone forever. I had moved from that hard reality of the unspoken into the dream now and each passing hour was an open book. I wondered about this place Wenfold: many things turned around it, it seemed, as though it were the hub of many tales.

Again, though, the minstrels made much of the events that were then to come: the gathering of arms, the muster of the Company, the flying of banners in the autumn winds. Their songs are good enough for all of that —I shall not dwell on it. It was two long, wondering, anxious months before we rode from Helca’s Castle, as though we waited for a sign —but it was time that at the end seemed to have passed quickly, for in it I learned much of the skills of the sword from Cundria and Barragath, and of riding from other lords, and of archery,

and of life in the Wild. I absorbed all that they would teach, as though I had thirsted for it, and not for the first time did I hear it said that I should have been born a man. It was Cundria who spoke to me of that, telling me that it was folly, and that in her home of Valadria womenfolk wore swords openly, and rode to the hunt, and fought where needful, and neither the tasks of a man nor of a woman were divided as they were in Restonia.

Cundria was a strange woman to me, not because of her great skill with sword or bow, nor because of her pride and openness with words, nor yet because of her white hair which flashed in the sun. It was in her manner to me that I felt her strangeness: she was the first woman to treat me as at least an equal. All other ladies of the castle, whether noblewomen or serving wenches, had shown me the same intolerance and impatience as the men. To them, I was no more than a waif of unknown parentage, the ward of Visaeon, albeit a pretty one —an odd girl, perhaps even a changeling, my prettiness unnatural. The protection of the Lord Visaeon had saved me from the worst of their tongues or blows, but I was an outcast among them, I well knew. It was not so with Cundria. She respected me in a way I had rarely felt. Thus it was that when I saw her with Galatar, walking and talking in the cloisters of the castle or through the orchards, my heart was glad —those two had become the barest shadow of the parents I had never known. The feelings that had stirred in me at Tarthos for Galatar had changed: I became to him a kind of daughter —for too brief a time, as I now can see.

There was something else, though, which I can write now,

the power of which would have eluded me at that time: I sensed that Cundria saw something in me that at first she was reluctant to tell —it lay behind the way she looked at me. One day, after we had fought with blunted swords in the orchard, and I had succeeded for the first time in unseating her blade from her hand, I asked her the question that had been forming in my mind:

‘Cundria,’ I said, as I bathed my head in cool water from the well, ‘why do you look at me as though you see more in my face than the sun reveals?’

She glanced up at me.

‘Is it because of the tale that Lord Visaeon told, of my coming from the forest?’

Cundria paused and wiped at her brow before answering.

‘Partly it is his words,’ she said carefully, ‘but partly not. Had he not spoken there would still be some wonder about you.’

‘Why?’

She sat near the wall of the well, and collected her words.

‘In my land of Valadria stands a great tower, thrust out in stone from the mountains of the Penning until it looks out across all of Valadria. The White Tower, it is called, in honour of that greater northern tower whence the gods watch over us. In that place is a wondrous portrait, now many hundreds of years old, but glowing in colour still. It is a likeness of our first queen, Valadria, after whom our realm is named, she who brought down the Enchantress and ended the Great Winter, she who was the mother of Valkurn the Great.’

I waited for her to go on.

‘That likeness and a portrait of you, when you come to full

womanhood, could be one and the same,' she said.

My heart moved within me.

'What does it mean?' I said, after a while.

'I do not know, but often I have pondered on it, and on the words of the old lord to whom you were entrusted. I do not say that you are she, Valadria the Valiant, returned from the Inner Worlds, after death —but the likeness cannot be denied. The same beauty is there.'

We said no more of this, for I fell silent and became not a little afraid —but time sped on, and our conversation, though not forgotten, did not wound our friendship, which grew over the weeks.

I tried not to think of any of what had been said, or thought, or whispered about me in that time. I had grown used to rumour, and had walled it off all my life, as I have said —but now it seemed the walls I had built shifted their foundations and threatened no longer to hold, and I hurried on to do daylight things, learning much and becoming mistress of many tasks, until my many twilight questions could be answered.

THE RIDE OF THE CRIMSON COMPANY

*Dark fell the dread then, on those riders,
As swords were unsheathed in lands forsaken,
Blood spilled blackly by blades that bit deep;
But none felt the night more than Ryna
As the deeds of darkness were divulged
Before her young eyes yearning for light.*

-from The Song of Ryna

The time came then, for our ride from Helca's Castle. The songs say that we rode out seeking adventure, and spin the tale so that it seems the gods themselves guided our steps. Perhaps this was so indeed, but as I saw it then it was otherwise.

Let me first describe our number: ten there were in that company, including myself, though at that time all accounted me too young to be made a knight of it, and I rode out of Restonia with the rest as a companion only.

The Lord Ulforth was our captain, the mightiest man-at-arms and leader of men in the South Vale, where the Lords took no king but waited for the High King to return. He was a tall man, with fierce yellow hair, a yellow beard, and sharp blue eyes, robed in deep blue with sashes of red. He was stern of voice, but I came to know him as a gentle man: he had lost his first wife and children to a raiding party of Shadowed Men on the borders of the South Vale some time ago, but this made him no lover of war—he wielded a sword with no joy, but with a cold precision.

Then came Barragath, the smith with the silver hammer, riding his great horse Hullax. He was glad to be riding again—too long had he waited in Restonia for his chance to fight. His father had been a smith, he said, and he had promised him to work the forge also, but his own heart sought adventure. He laughed often, and loved children—he seemed to them, I suppose, like a great brown bear, chasing them through the streets and throwing them up high in the air.

Cundria rode beside Galatar—she robed in white fur from the northern mountains, he in the shining red brass of Turgal. Galatar, being taller and broader than any there, needed a horse larger than the others, and the mighty Ballax, cousin of Hullax, was chosen, and bore him well. The Emperor's son wore a red cape over all, but needed no sign, no ring or coronet, to show that he was a prince, for his size and his dark eyes alone made ordinary men bow before him. Cundria rode her white horse Aleria, swifter than the north wind, and whenever I looked I saw them together.

With these rode Balladin and Drenca, warriors of Restonia, bearing shields which carried their devices; there also came red-haired Colomain of Rondar, who had ridden in from the west, the son of the king of that land, which, while not accounted among the realms of Shand, was its closest ally in blood and friendship among the kingdoms of the Middle Lands. Colomain fast became friends with Barragath, for they seemed of a like mind and spirit—fiery, restless, quick to both anger and joy. It is said that the people of Rondar have one part fire in their blood, and I could well believe it. Colomain was also a minstrel, learned in all manner of songs,

and he bore a small golden harp which he made sing with him on the road. I had never heard such music, and his was the most beautiful mastery of the harp I ever heard, save one only, and that one comes at the end of this tale.

Next came the Mirian lord Wirrithal, thin and grey of face and manner, who bore himself with pride at all times, but who, as I later learned, was a true friend and hardy fighter. And last of all came Risaeon, the son of my guardian the Lord Visaeon. He came hurrying from the South Vales, where he had led a sortie into the enemy's Middle Lands, and he had much to report to Helca and his father late into the night.

Thus it was that, before we all rode out from that gate, we were summoned before the King and the old lord, and Helca spoke of the amassing of great armies in the Middle Lands ready for the invasion of Shand on the southern banks of the Shandbound far away, and he questioned again the counsel of sending me, a girl, out into the wild with a company of soldiers on that quest. But then Visaeon spoke:

'Say not words of ill hope, King. For long have I pondered this deed that we now do, wondering whether it is folly only or if we are guided in it by things we do not know. There are the words of the Companion of Kirratamon that I have spoken to you, but there are also other wisdoms in the world. Therefore I say this —that you should ride south, taking such ways as the lie of the land and the movements of the enemy permit, crossing into the Middle Lands and there upholding such deeds of honour as you can —helping the needy, freeing the imprisoned, leading the swords of our foes astray. But make haste and tarry not! For Wenfold is hidden and will not reveal itself to you easily. Follow the paths I have described

to you, Ulforth, and you will come to the Eye of Deldellu, a great stone that marks the way to the valley wherein Wenfold lies.

‘High in the towers of this castle we keep a Book, in which all the history of this realm and much else besides is recorded. Since Seleca’s time I have kept that book, but it was kept before me far back into the beginnings of Shand. Yet that book contains much which is only a copy from another, greater book, and it takes its name from the older: it is called the Book of Seven, and in it deep marvels are spoken of, and whether they are true or mere words of song I know not. They say that that a more ancient Book is kept at Wenfold, and that its scribe is the Warden, and that he is the oldest and wisest of all living in Gandria. I say, seek him out! And by him we shall know whether Shand shall live or die.’

The Company fell silent then, and I could not read all their hearts —some were glad of a direction, however uncertain; others seemed awed. I myself did not know what to think: my own heart was awchirl with passions and joys and dreads that even now, as I sit reflecting back on all that busy, dancing time, elude me like a stick in the racing stream. Helca embraced us all, and me last. I had no words for him; my eyes were full of tears of either joy or fear. Alina stood in the crowd that had now begun to gather behind him, creeping in from the courtyards beyond. Her face was pale. her eyes wide like copper coins in her face. I could not look at her.

‘Ryna,’ Helca said, holding me, ‘I know not if I shall see you again with mortal eyes. My heart forebodes that I will not. But perhaps I shall yet see your children. Ride proudly,

and though you now know that you are not of Restonia, think of this kingdom as your home!’

I nodded, thinking to swear to him that I should return, but I could not speak. I mounted my horse, a young mare from the king’s own stables, Merreal I called her —and we slowly rode out through the courtyards of the castle in which I had spent my whole life. Then Barragath stood in his saddle and cried out to Ulforth who rode at the head of the company:

‘My lord, if we are the bearers of Hope Unknown, let us ride out galloping, with our heads held high, and give the people something to cheer about!’

And Ulforth smiled, and nodded, and the Company quickened its pace and by the time we had reached the main gate we were moving at a good speed. When we emerged into the sunlight, then, and the townspeople lifted their flags and coloured banners and shouted, we rode down the road between them full of joy, and crested the southern rise at a full gallop, hearing the echoing cries die behind us, and my eyes were still bright with tears, but I laughed as we rode.

I will not dwell overmuch on that journey, nor how quickly my spirits cooled, quicker even than the season. We rode south, through farmland and on muddy roads that betokened the onslaught of a fierce winter, and the weather grew grey, and so did all our hearts. It seemed then far more an act of folly to me to ride out from safety, aimless and without hope than it had done in the warmth of Helca’s Castle. I was not overly curious about my past, nor my future, as the chill winds began to freeze my fingers to the reins and the rain began to sweep across the edge of the

world. But in time we came down the southern roads to the end of Restonia.

There we saw two things which chilled my heart further—one was the Wood of Seven, its tall outlying trees darkening the rise to our left, sending my mind spinning with unclear images, beckoning and repelling me—I looked for any shadow moving in its green and grey depths, but saw nothing; the second was the soldier we met, stumbling northward on a tired horse, his brow bloodied with wounds.

We dismounted and tended to him, and he told of the battle at Reskille's castle on the southern border, and how a force of Shadowed Men had attacked in the night and surrounded the castle, catching Lord Reskille's men by surprise and burning the surrounding fields. He had been sent to bring warning to Helca and to return with help if he could, but he had been discovered and had hardly won his way to the road. Anskille was his name.

'Tell us Anskille,' said Lord Ulforth as Colomain bathed the wounded man's brow, 'how many of the enemy are there?'

'One hundred is my guess, my lord,' Anskille replied, 'and they came at a good time, knowing that my lord Reskille is away with his household at the border. He may return with the dawn, but there will be much blood spilled before then I fear. They plant great fires close to the walls.'

Ulforth thought for a moment and then held low-voiced discussions with Galatar, Colomain and Barragath. After a while they apparently had decided on a course of action and we rode on, Anskille, bandaged and breathing easier, riding behind us.

Though again the minstrels say I led the great relief of Reskille's castle at Tirith's Bridge, riding at the head of that noble company to separate the song-swollen thousand-strong horde of Shadowed Men from their captain, bringing rescue to the besieged women and children within, the truth is otherwise, and I can now write without shame that I skulked instead in the woods, watching over Anskille, as Ulforth led Galatar and Barragath and Drenca and those other warriors into battle against a hundred foes, and the thought of the blood made me sick.

I heard the tale later: I saw that Ulforth had sent Drenca and Colomain ahead in the night to spy out the land, and, seeing that the Carthog captain had pitched his black pavilion some distance from his troops, fearing no enemy from the east, they reported back to Ulforth that a sortie led from the woods would catch the Carthogs by surprise and leave them leaderless. I heard Colomain speak of the prowess of Galatar and Cundria as they rode together through the lines of the enemy, driving a bloody wedge through that camp and capturing the Carthog leader; I heard of the charge of Barragath and Colomain as they rode down on the besiegers near the walls and, with the swords of Balladin and Drenca at their sides, how they cleared the gate of the castle so that an armed sortie from within came out with trumpets blowing. I heard how fiercely Wirrithal and Risaeon fought as the Carthogs regrouped and prepared to rescue their captain with the dawn; and I heard how the sun rose, and how with it came the trumpets of the Lord Reskille, returned from his patrol in the west, and how the Carthogs then were caught between the swords of the Crimson

Company and a force not much smaller than their own, and how they sued for peace.

For myself, I was glad to be out of it. Though it shadowed my heart that I had not ridden with them, but had been assigned to watch the wounded man in the woods behind the castle like some old nurse, the tale of blood and swords made me tremble. When the Lord Reskille sent riders back to Helca's Castle to warn the king and to report on the narrow triumph of the relief of the siege, I almost wished I was going with them.

But that was not to be. Three days we stayed with Reskille, and we were treated as honoured guests and as heroes of legend, though the tale of that Company had scarce begun. Common folk and noble alike seemed ever to confuse our deeds with the earlier great legends of the first Crimson Company, formed long ago by the High King Valkurn in the golden age of Shand—but, no doubt, that was part of what Visaeon and Helca intended, that by calling on ancient wonder, wonders might be re-spawned in the light of the present age.

As for my part, I am still unclear on how the song-makers contrived me to be such a valiant swordswoman at so young an age—but I will let it be, knowing as I do that herein is the record of actuality. It was the first test of my young pride against the true horrors of the world, and I had failed it, I thought.

In time then we bade goodbye to the Lord Reskille, and were cheered by his people as we had been before by our own, as we rode over the bridge of the Shandbound out of

the Four Kingdoms and into the Middle Lands.

We skirted the Grey Moors, their topmost hills already white with the first snows of winter. We sheltered in shallow valleys as cold airs moved over those desolate places, and in the dead of those dark nights I longed for the simple company of Alina and the warmth of the hearth at Helca's Castle. I was too young to be in the wild with these old and seasoned warriors, I thought —Visaeon had been wrong to let me go. This was not my place at all, and I would meet a dark end were I to stay with them. These thoughts pressed on me more strongly as we went, but there was no choice: there was no road back now except through enemy-haunted lands, as Restonia armed and mustered against the mounting numbers of the Turgalins and Shadowed Men who now roamed in bands along its borders.

As we left the Grey Moors and came to the lower wooded country that was northern Prundria, a small realm in the Middle Lands, the Company had to skirt around a large army of Turgalin warriors encamped there. Galatar looked on them intently from the shelter of distant trees; he told Ulforth their number and some of their names, but he also said that it was unwise for the Company to remain there where they might be discovered and where he might be recognised —for he had been marked, he said, by the branded scar upon his face, so that he could never again walk among his own people without it being instantly known who he was.

Ulforth led the Company east, therefore, around the encampment, and then south again, where we crossed the paths of several smaller bands —some Carthogs, some

Turgalins, some merely bandits of mixed origins— roaming the wilds in search of prey and booty. The Middle Lands had become lawless with the conquerors, and here those skilled with swordblade ruled. Some of these bands the Company confronted and dispersed, with great skill of blade, bow and strategem, and soon the word spread that a strong force of armed warriors from Shand was abroad and rode freely in Prundria, and we met no more loose bands, save one. And there I saw a sight which captured for me the feeling that had been growing within my heart.

There was a wandering line of stragglers: a group of ragged horsemen, Turgalin it seemed, leading in chains about a dozen women, children and old men. The Company came upon them at dawn —Drenca and Balladin, the best scouts, rode back to Ulforth reporting them on an eastward road that crossed our way ahead. Dim, drizzly rain smeared the horizon as the grey light grew and Ulforth took counsel with the others. I did not even bother to listen —I had by now come to be ignored when any crisis of arms developed. I had come to see myself as a distraction, a child-companion on the road, useful in times of rest or song, worse than useless in battle, and my fiery pride had shrunk into a cold and shivering thing. But they stood quite near to me in the dawnlight as they spoke, and I could make out their words.

‘They go to serve my brother as slaves in distant Turgal, is my guess,’ said Galatar. ‘Slaves —or worse. These are some innocents of Prundria, gathered from a nearby town or homestead. We are enough in number to challenge them.’

Ulforth nodded, and another plan was formed: a short while later, as the straggling band made its way into a

shallow valley through sheets of cold rain, Galatar stood forth to greet them, a shadowy giant in the mist. The leader of the band, a surly Turgalin, looked up and stopped, seeing what he thought was one of his own kind, a mighty captain of men it seemed, barring the way.

‘Ho there!’ he cried out in the Turgalin tongue. ‘From where do you come? And why do you bar the road of the Emperor’s servants on his business?’

The wandering line had come to a halt. The slaves, ragged, cold and completely dispirited, scarcely noticed what happened next: the Company slowly emerged on both sides of its road and rode down the gentle slopes until the Turgalins were surrounded. I counted them: there were about twenty warriors, but they looked tired and ill-fed —the long road back to their homes was not treating them kindly. But their prisoners looked much worse: children in rags, stumbling or being carried in the arms of elders who were equally wretched. They hardly stirred when they saw that their company had halted.

‘Is the Emperor of Turgal truly a dealer in slaves?’ said Galatar’s voice in the misty rain. ‘Answer me, Lanbatar!’ he added, and I saw that he must have recognised the leader of the Turgalin party and used his right name.

Lanbatar stirred in his saddle, peering forward.

‘Who is this that addresses me so? Speak, or be named an enemy of Turgal!’ he shouted.

Galatar rode forward a few slow paces.

‘I am no enemy of Turgal, whether named as one or no,’ he said, and I saw that Lanbatar recognised him —the Turgalin captain fell back, drawing his sword, but then

noticed that his entire company was surrounded by mysterious figures in the grey drizzle. He snarled.

‘What do you want?’ he cried. ‘Your name is accursed to us—you have been cast out of the Imperial House! You are to be slain on sight! What is your business here?’

‘The business of any true Turgalin: the restoration of freedom and honour, the bringing of justice, the healing of harms,’ said Galatar, slowly riding forward still as Lanbatar moved slowly back. ‘Let these slaves go free, and give up your weapons, Lanbatar—you shall yourself be freed by your own action from that to which you have submitted.’

Lanbatar looked frantically around him, then came to some decision and rode at Galatar, barking swift orders to his men to attack also. The Turgalins charged at their ambushers, but they were weary and afraid, and in a few hard moments they were slain or made captive. Lanbatar lay dead—I had not seen how it had happened—and Galatar had dismounted and was cleaning his blade. I went over to him as Colomain and the others freed the slaves.

‘Thus do the seeds of evil gain purchase on the soil of good hearts,’ he was muttering to himself, and then to me as I came closer. ‘Lanbatar was not an evil man at first—but by slow obedience to that part of himself which he should have mastered, he came to this. May his spirit find a better peace!’

We joined the others. Of the dozen slaves there, six were of the royal household of Prundria, and six were their lords or servants: none of them had agreed to serve the Turgalin Prince Baladac who sought to become Overlord of the Middle Lands, and so they had been consigned to slavery in Turgal, and made to march across the lands in chains, even

the children.

It was in the eyes of the children that I saw that which chilled me more than the blood that had been spilled: the deep scar of dispossession, despair, and terror. It struck me deeply. Here was a shadow which, I hated to admit, ran darker than my own. And in children! How could Raendu, the god of light, permit such a thing? For slavery is indeed an evil thing, and more evil in the innocent. So my thought turned to these deep matters, and, as the others dealt with each day's concerns, I began to wander in a different, darker world.

Myroc, the king of Prundria, was a tall, old man, who gathered his sons and daughters and grandchildren around him in thankfulness, and then led the Company to a deserted farmhouse a few miles from that drizzly valley, where we risked a fire and ate as well as we could.

'I have already offered you what thanks we can,' he said to Ulforth, 'but little else is now mine to give, and we must live ourselves as outlaws here in the wilds of my land until such time as we can escape north or south. But ask anything else of me and I will gladly give it.'

The day had drawn on, and the rain had eased to showers that swept across the fields under a grey sky as we talked and ate. Balladin and Wirrithal were on watch; the rest of us dried our clothes and rested as well as we could in the old house.

'Tell us of any news that you may have, King,' said Ulforth, 'for we ride in these lands for the most part blindly, moving south but questing also for the best and most honourable road, in that way to serve whatever remains of

honour in these lands.'

Myroc gave a little bitter laugh. In his voice was the echo of the despair I had seen in his children's eyes.

'Honour departed when the enemy came, Lord Ulforth,' he said. 'They burn and rend and seem to kill without reason. Long have they hungered for our lands, I guess, and they seek to leave their mark quickly and deeply, fearing perhaps that the hour of their conquest is short. But I have little news, except this: Baladac of Turgal, he who names himself Regent of that realm —though I learn from noble Galatar here that this is not so by truth and law— commands these new hosts in person, and makes his camp in Tara beyond the mountains. They say he will ride west soon to lead the coming onslaught against Shand.'

A murmur went around our company at that —for I had heard enough of the affairs of war and of men to know that Baladac was our chief enemy in terms of arms, and to know of his movements was therefore important.

'Then when comes this onslaught, King?' said Ulforth.

'That I know not —but I would say that it will fall before the end of the winter, for Baladac, they say, is full of fire to be done, so that he may crown himself High King of Shand, adding that throne also to the one he has usurped.'

'Aye,' said Galatar, 'Baladac is full of fire —but oft is the hand burnt that is careless with the torch, as we say in Turgal. Let him come and see if he is made welcome.'

Ulforth stood and paced slowly about the small space, warming his hands by the fire.

'And yet we are not strong enough to defy him, nor can less than a dozen of us hope to reach him through a thousand

of his freshest warriors, these Wildweards of his. How then should our road lie?' he said.

We sat pondering this for some time—but it was agreed that we should continue our ride south, across the lands of the enemy, and swiftly, before they mustered forces to pursue us. Baladac must wait; if Galatar could reach Turgal and his father the Emperor, maybe Baladac could still be denied his prize.

These were the matters, then, which occupied these warrior-lords and fighting men, and Cundria with her Valadrian blade and bow. But I was no warrior then, and had not yet drawn blood from any save Galatar with a weapon. I think back now on those times and wonder that I had ever been permitted to ride out with that company, knowing now how perilous that road was. The thoughts that pressed on me earlier remained with me throughout that journey, and they grew stronger the further away I came from Shand: this was no place for one so young and untried and weak as I, this dark, blood-filled world.

The world had indeed begun to look different to my young eyes. I did not know if all souls grew in this way—I had too little to do with the souls of others to tell—but the idea that I had held of the world as a child was slowly changed as we progressed deeper into the Middle Lands and became surrounded by thicker and thicker fences of the enemy. No longer was the world a place of great ease and joy observed in others' lives, from which the shadow in my own heart excluded me, as I had thought; no longer did I feel alone in my unnamed grief, and the grief of others seemed greater. When I looked into the eyes of the grandchildren of

Myroc, and saw their helpless fear and wonder, like the fear and wonder of beasts, my own fear was stopped; I saw the lands filling with soldiers, I saw the burned fields, the wrecked homes, the carnage and the slaughter, and no longer could I yearn simply for what others had. Suddenly, they had less than I. I began to withdraw from the certainties of my early youth; my world shrank into a colder heart. Sometimes in the night I wept for no reason, and my dreams were dark.

During this time, though I still wished myself the daughter of Galatar and Cundria, seeing them already married in my mind, I made new friends among the Company. The unlikeliest of these was Wirthal: he was silent like me, and often grey of heart, and he was the kind of friend who did not speak, but merely came and shared the long silences with me, either as we sat by a lake looking at the stars at night, or rode through winter hills in the early morning, side by side. Thus grew a friendship of silence, a grey companionship, for which I was thankful.

But the other friends were the opposite: first was Barragath, who treated me like a child, but in a way which did not cause me offence—he laughed too much, and was too full of life and fire to let me be offended. He taught me skills of riding, and woodcraft, and told me many tales of his youthful adventures in the Middle Lands.

The other friend, like Barragath, and often to be found with him, was Colomain. The red-haired prince of Rondar had the gift of song-making and singing. He too often laughed, and seemed to play like a child but without loss of manhood, but in his singing these things came together in a solemnity which held me transfixed: I had never known the

power of the beauty of music to pierce even those innermost walls of our soul that we build in youth for our own defence. This Colomain showed me, and in so doing he drew from me tears of a different kind than those of fear or dread or grief. The tears of song were always after a puzzle to me —were they the wine of a deeper sadness than mortals were wont to feel? Or did tears mean something else than grief in the world of the gods where music takes us?

Colomain's songs were the thing that carved out of the darkness a kind of road that I could walk, inwardly, and one song in particular was to enchant me. But I must return to the tale at hand, so that I can say more of this, for then the frozen core of my heart that had grown before I reached the end of that ride might begin to be understood.

We left Myroc and his family with what arms we had gathered from the captive or slain enemy, and bade them take care, advising them to flee as soon as they could either northwards to Shand or south to the hills at the feet of the Guardian Mountains, where they might find a life of sorts until their kingdom became free again. He looked on us with gratitude nonetheless, and with amazement at the prowess of the Company, and he wished us well as we rode over the southernmost ridge and departed from him in the cold sunlight of a winter's afternoon.

It was now a month since we had ridden out of Restonia, and we now lived by the bow and from the wild stream, and I was fitter and stronger, albeit leaner and always hungrier, than I had ever been before. We knew now that we were pursued: Drenca returned one evening from a scouting trip northwards to watch our rear, to report that a company of

Carthog hunters were following our trail. These were ambushed and dispatched accordingly, though two escaped to take more news of our deeds to their masters—but Ulforth took counsel from this and rode more swiftly south, progressing very carefully between townships and avoiding the main highways of those little kingdoms.

Fifteen tiny realms lay like jewels upon a string between Shand and the great river, Tarrabelner, and once in my youth I could have named them all—but now each one was a burden to us, its borders patrolled, its roads full of the enemy, its towers watchful. And the names of those lands were at that time overshadowed by their new overlords. I saw many other horrors—slavery, torture, dismay, famine—too many horrors, things I would not let my own daughter see, as we made our cautious way through the valleyed countryside and came to the edges of townships nearer to the river. Would that Shand possessed a thousand armies, ready to sweep down from the north to put an end to all this misery! But it did not, and instead the misery crept remorselessly towards its own heart. In those nights I wept the most, and the cold companionship of Wirrithal was my best comfort.

The Company, by chance or fate, came through many deeds unscathed, and earned its place in song thereby. I quickly became a scout of some skill, an archer praised by the best, a rider able to handle the wildest of mounts, small though I was: but I had yet not seen swordplay firsthand, nor did I wish to. I had quickly grown sick of blood, whosoever's veins it flowed from. In this, some might say I remained a woman—but then those few would not know their own

hearts, nor the true hearts of men. Time may have given the sword into a man's hand, but of all the company there I met none who loved the taking of life or the use of a blade for its own sake, and those were accounted the most noble men of that age. But for me, nobility began to count for little —what use a noble heart when the tide of the world was blood, and the wind blew evilly?

I shall not dwell longer on that journey. We came to Tarrabelner, and by guile and luck gained the ferry to the other side of that mighty river, wider than any I had seen. And when we disembarked from the ferry we had at last come through the Middle Lands proper, and were in the true wilderness, frowned down upon by the Guardian Mountains ahead. But for a few hunters' huts in the nearby woods, no one dwelt here, and no enemy had yet come, we thought. We rode high into the foothills in relative peace, but ever watchful across the water, lest the enemy's desire for our heads —which now carried a bounty of gold, we had heard — overtopple their lack of desire to cross Tarrabelner and pursue us into the Wild.

Here was my first real experience of mountains —the steep wooded glens, the great quietness, the grey and white sentinels of solitude, the endless music of falling water, the mighty eagles against the clouds. As we climbed higher, seeking old mountain paths and hunters' trails, I saw clouds beneath us, and looked north to distant Shand and wondered at the sheer size of the world. There, spread out all around me, east, north and west, were all the lands of men west of the Mountains of Morning: and yet, though it seemed that I had been riding forever, I had not yet seen even half of them.

And the sky which domed them was deeper. Where, my mind suddenly asked me again, where in all of this was there true peace, true contentment? I rode on.

We made camp in a dell one evening, and, having had no sign at all of any pursuit, we lit a fire and sat about, knowing that we had now to find our way. Two paths had opened to us as we rode along, and some favoured one, some the other. The first was the path to battle—the road back down into the Middle Lands in stealth, there to stir rebellion and plot the uprising which would topple Baladac and free those kingdoms under his sway. Those of the Company who most favoured this road were Drenca and Balladin, Cundria, Barragath, and Risaeon—for they were most heartily sick of the torment they had witnessed in the places we had passed through, and they could no longer tolerate riding by without taking action of some sort against it, however ill-considered or fraught with risk that option might prove.

The other road was the path through the mountains to the mysterious Wenfold, there to find the Warden, if he lived, and there to seek advice and find where best the blows of Shand should fall. Those who supported this road were Wirrithal and Colomain and, to my surprise, Galatar. For myself, I knew not what I thought; Ulforth was likewise undecided, basing his wish on the decision of the Company as a whole, but favouring, I thought, the road to Wenfold.

‘For I deem that in deciding the purpose of our journey at Helca’s council the worldly stratagems of the warrior did not play much part, and I believe that they should not be the deciding weight now,’ Ulforth said, addressing us all in the firelight. ‘If we had been sent to bring war and revolt, more

should have been sent with us, and by different roads. Our guide is not the affairs of men in the lands of the world, but the tale of history and legend. And Galatar must reach Turgal, and be joined with his allies there, or much will be lost.'

'Yet I see the faces of the children,' said Barragath, 'the dispossessed, the slaves, and my blood grows hot and my hand tightens on my sword. And you, Galatar —does not your heart burn for revenge on this usurping brother of yours, whose evil spreads further by the day? Come, let us ride down together and seek him out!'

Galatar was staring at the fire, his darkened eyes in shadow.

'Indeed vengeance burns within me,' he said, not looking up, 'but the fire that consumes one's soul is a flame of folly, and the smoke that rises from it must not be permitted to hide our path, hard to see as it is already. I will follow the unclear road —I forebode that my road to Baladac will be longer and harder.'

'If Galatar the Giant rides to Wenfold,' said Cundria, 'then I would change my choice and ride with him.'

'But what do we know of this Wenfold, or its Warden?' said Drenca.

'They say that the road to Wenfold is marked by a great flat stone with a hole right through it,' said Risaeon. 'The old lord Visaeon, my father, called it the Eye of Deldellu. No one knows why it is placed there, nor what it signifies.'

'Are we not then more likely to be lost in the mountains seeking this stone, and have nothing to return to in the summer but slavery and death?' Drenca went on. 'Who can

shed light on this?’

Colomain then stood up, and, walking to his saddlebag, he fetched out his golden harp.

‘I am not one to cool the blood of my friend Barragath when the fighting mood stirs him,’ he said, ‘nor would I stay my own hand from my sword if I felt the time aright to use it. But we lose the thread of something here if we do not answer Drenca’s question —and that thread is this: what tale are we part of? What music are we caught up in? The world is not always as it seems —the first lesson that a minstrel learns in my country is that all things are part of a story, and the legends, deeds and names of the old tales are but a different part of the song to the one that we see played out by the instruments of the sun and moon before us each day.

‘To be a minstrel in Rondar, one must journey deep into the Great Western Wild, and there spend seven nights alone, listening for the music of that place —and when the young bard returns to the firesides of men, he must sing that song to them, or part of it. And many songs come out of that mighty wood, and they are all heard as part of the one, ongoing song. So Wenfold, the Wenfold of legend, is but a name of a place on the road of other wanderers who came before us. This is best told in song itself.’

Ulforth nodded, and Colomain’s fingers began to strum along the strings of his harp in song —and if I render it ill here, then I was never a minstrel, and try merely to catch some of the spell with my pen so that any who come to read this tale may see why his words reached me.

The music was light, soft, sad. As he played, he began to sing:

*Long languished the low-hearted king,
Wandering i'the Wood where woe had fallen,
Knowing not his name, nor any path,
Seeking shadows and escape from shame.
Grief gripped his heart, greater than goodness,
Black blew the breezes, bitter, betraying.
On went Valkurn, over the vastness,
Beguiled by brook and branches deceiving,
Deeper in darkness, drenched with dim tears,
Till there in the thickets, thorny and twisted,
A green glade opened, grass-filled and growing,
Full of fire that fell from the firmament.*

*Grey figures stood there, grown over with green,
Old beyond knowing, gnarled and unnamed,
Beckoning to him with breathless mouthings,
Calling quietly across the clearing,
Speaking in whispers of shattered kingdoms,
The failing of freedoms, the folly of men.
Drawn was he to them, dream-filled and dazed,
Lost in lamenting, looking for comfort.
There the god spoke to him, guiding his footsteps,
Bringing back beauty, giving him grace
For pain beyond price, piercing and lifting,
Letting the Light that gleamed loving on life
Fall from the heavens into his heart.*

*Broad was the burden, bright was the Promise,
Pure in the taking, priceless in giving.*

*There the god gave to him, hard by the statues,
The Crown of the Wood, cradled at his feet.
Firmly he fitted it to his forehead,
Honoured in sunlight by the green circlet,
Seeing shapes shifting in that shadowed place.
Then the god hailed him, bidding him hurry
To the eastern shore, sure-footed and swift,
To meet the mightiest of mortals, he
Who was hailed as Herald in later times:
Estran the Strong-heart, sturdy of sinew,
Bringing bright bounty and the power of the
God to him as High King in the world's hardness.
The Bay of the Green Archer, that was the place,
There hurried Valkurn, over the mountains,
Vaulting the valleys, running by rivers,
Through fogs and fens afar, fearing not fell forms
That clawed and caught at him, cleaving them quick
With his steel-bladed sword till it snapped
In his hand. Hilt now useless, he hurled it
From him, fighting the fierce foes with his
Bare hands, braving the blackness of those dim
Valleys. Venturing over the vastness
Of that far place came Valkurn the High King,
Down to the dim shore — dawn was now breaking
On the wild waves. Where was the Herald?*

*Nothing but night's ghost knew him by that shore
Till he spied a ship, standing in harbour,
Waiting without wind or oar by waterside,
To take him far from the coast, cold waters*

*Washing at its wide bows. Waiting not for
Further word, Valkurn fled the mortal marches,
Meaning to move as the god had bidden,
Trav'ling the turmoil of the untethered
Sea, hearing now, hardly to be heeded,
Moving over waves, a mighty music,
Enchanted, churning the ocean with its
Song, seeking him out and sending him word,
Waiting for him to weave over the waves
And come to the call, the call of the Horn,
Gulinol the Great, groaning in the air
With a vast voice, as he advanced over
The sea. Swiftly he came there, to shores
Lost from the long lore of lords and wise men,
Remnants of rocky isles drown'd deep in the
Enveloping ocean, endlessly o'ertopp'd
By the brooding blackness of the briny
Water, wild in the winter, witnessing
Alone the long years of lost ages.
There Valkurn found tall Estran, winding the
Horn Gulinol, now gripped in his great hand,
Standing on sudden cliffs, sheer from the sea.
There the High King met the Holy Herald,
Forging the friendship that defied Darkness
Denying the dark foe his expected due.
There was the doom made, mighty in movement;
There said the Herald, high on the hilltop,
'Seek us the Sword, the Slayer of Dragons,
Seek us the Blade that burns the unworthy,
Deep undersea does it now dwell, down deep*

*In the darkness that danced there before Time.
True to his god and trusting the Herald,
Valkurn then leapt from the lip of that high
Place, plummeting down to the Night underneath,
Deep into dragon-realms, delving the Darkness
That no man had seen. Estran came also,
Carrying cold lantern, far underground.*

*There did the Sword shine, shimmering and golden,
Giving out a gleam greater than daylight:
Mingost the Mighty, blade from before time,
Fathered from fragments fiercer than flame.*

*Valkurn then cried out, voicing his anguish,
Giving the Dragons their Banesword to keep.
Deep came his answer, drowning the echo,
Telling him then truths greater than he knew.
Mingost they gave him, bane of their brothers,
Binding it with bonds broader than blood-oaths,
Bidding it return when destiny was done.
Forth strode the High King, fearing not the flames
Flaring in that firebrand that was now his own:
Tall he stood up there, fierce in the firelight,
Putting his palm to the hilt of the Sword.
It did not burn him, nor did he cry out,
Lifting that strong sword from its stone scabbard.
Thus did the High King, Valkurn the Mighty,
Bring out of blackness the Bane of the Night.*

Colomain put down his harp and spoke:

‘That was a rendering of part of the tale of Valkurn, High King of Shand in ages past, and how he came from bitter despair, lost in the Haunted Wood, to the Glade of the Seven Statues, there to speak with Raendu, who gave him a Crown of Wood and bade him go to the Bay of the Green Archer, where a boat took him to the lost Island of the Flowers where Estran, the Herald of Raendu, called to him with Gulinol the Great Horn. And then the tale tells of how Valkurn came through perils to find the Sword Mingost, that he later renamed Sundergost, the Sword of Hope, and how with it he conquered enemies far greater than those we now face.’

Ulforth nodded.

‘A good choice, and a reminder, as you say, of our place in this,’ he said. ‘For the Secondpeace of Shand was established by Valkurn over a thousand years ago, and if it is now to end, then we would do well to heed the tale of how he came to bring it about.’

No one spoke. The echoes of Colomain’s music were hovering, it seemed, in the surrounding trees. Ulforth said that we should retire, and decide our course in the morning. I was happy to do so.

Perhaps it seems folly now, but the music of the harp and the words of Colomain had reached into my heart profoundly, and I desired no more talk that night. My mind was filled with a golden light —I do not know how else to write it, I know not clearly what other words would serve. I did not see a sword, just a light. But all had changed; all had changed. I could not collect my thoughts at that time to say how. Other events were to rob me of the chance, as I shall now write, but, if my tale is to reveal anything of my soul,

then it remains an important, that song of Colomain's —how important it might have been, if things had been otherwise, shall become clear in time.

I stumbled off to bed. Rolled in my blanket, my mind swam with images. I heard the Horn Gulinol calling to me on the edge of sleep. Yearnings stirred in me. What was it about that song? What had it to do with me? I pushed it away, and tried to sleep, but in the great night which had begun to descend on my soul it was as though Raendu had thrown me a strand of gold to lead me down the path through the forests of this world's grief to his side.

Overhead, stars came out. The deeper blackness behind them fell away from me. I wondered if there were other lights in it, behind or beyond the lights we saw. Did the gods watch over us through eyes we would never see? I drifted off into dreams.

THE EYE OF DELDELLU

All roads lead to all doors —but the greatest of these doors is the Gate that was made in the Wall of the World.

-from The Book of Seven

When the old look back on their lives much that was strange at the time can seem clear. That Colomain's song had touched something in me I doubted not, but what it had touched I would not have dared to guess. Only now do I see it, at the very end, when the putting down of this pen truly means the finishing of my tale of life.

It was not as a minstrel would guess or sing: it did not seem that the power of the magic Sword Sundergost called out to me across the void of time from wherever it sat, summoning me to my destiny. Such things are the foundations of songs, and perhaps of the world too, as I now might admit —but life as it was lived by mortals did not appear so at that time. I knew nothing of Sundergost —only the fragments of songs and tales that I had heard, along with everyone else, sitting by the fireside at Helca's Castle in my youth: Sundergost the Great, the Golden Sword, the gift of the Dragons to the High King, the Hope of Men. I had even heard before the tale that Colomain had sung, albeit not as well rendered as by him —I knew how Valkurn had stumbled into the Wood of Seven, where Raendu himself had spoken to him, guiding him to the Herald and the Sword; I knew how he had used Sundergost to slay the Enchantress and the Serpent-King in the Underworld, and thus brought

about the Secondpeace of Shand. These were common enough tales. It was not, then, the tale alone, but its particular beauty and its timeliness that reached me.

Beauty pierces us, as I have said: it floats to the tops of our souls, and bathes there in the radiance that shines down from above. That light ripples down through it and illuminates those deeper parts of ourselves where no other light can reach. Colomain was the greatest minstrel of the land of minstrels, and so his music pierced me even deeper and kindled greater light than before —but still the coldness of my own heart would have extinguished the flame but for its timing, for at that time, as I have said, I yearned for something: I had seen enough of this world, enough blood, enough misery, enough pain. All my old fortresses against humanity, my own hatreds, my sulkings, my blames and my resentments, had been assailed over that last month and one by one, being besieged without mercy, they had fallen. Hate was larger than my hate; others had more cause to blame than I did. I did not know how to look at the world anymore.

One thing only remained, it seemed: it appeared to me that, stripped of all its finery and its trimmings, the world was as dead as a Shadowed Man's eyes. I had long suspected it, but this journey was painfully confirming it. My soul began to rest in that emptiness, growing more and more confident in the knowledge that joy and light was an illusion, a phantom trickery of mortal life, sent to taunt us in the eternal darkness of the void. In this confidence I now became more assured —for had I not myself been abandoned in the wilds, left to the whims of the weather, orphaned at birth? Was I not merely a waif of the woods? Visaeon's tale had

unsettled this a little, hinting at a deeper meaning, at some unspoken destiny, but that was not enough. I remained a stranger in the world, an unwelcome guest —and all my hatreds and fears thus built one last defence behind which they could cringe, flinging cold water over the fires of life without, creating a frozen refuge within.

These things were beyond me then —all I knew was that something in my soul that had ached for as long as I could remember, and that was now bleeding in me like an open wound, had briefly been touched by a ray of warmth, the dimmest, shortest glimpse of hope, the faintest promise of healing, the most distant echo of hope. I knew that it was bound up with the song and perhaps even the Sword, but beyond that I knew nothing. My dreams that night were full of weeping —not weeping because of loss, or pain, just weeping, long, long weeping without purpose as though I had been born of tears.

I awoke in the middle of the night. All around was quiet. I saw the silhouette of Wirthal on watch against the light of the stars. Nothing moved. But I was suddenly convinced of some danger, too vague to name. I got up.

Balladin was also on watch near the head of the small glen in which we had camped. A dim path led up the hillside, a mere animal track in the wilderness, I thought. I felt a strong urge to follow it. I had learned enough of woodcraft from Colomain, Barragath and Cundria to slip past Balladin in the dark, and I did so, winding my way upwards across the face of a steep hill. I had some half-thought of looking out on the world from a high place, and climbed further up, through thick bushes and young trees.

I came soon to what seemed like a cleft, high in the hilltop. There, almost hidden by bushes that spread like hands over its entrance, was a rough stair. I pushed my way through the bushes and, continuing upward beyond the crown of the hillside, found myself climbing a steep face of windswept rock with a precipice to my left and a pale stone cliff to my right, the outflung leg of some mountain above me in the night. The path wound up and across the cliff, its steps cracked and faded. As I rose higher, I looked out over the lands to the north—I could see the silver line of Tarrabelner far below, snaking its way from the edge of sight on my right, from the east, to be lost in the shadows of night in the west. The bright moon glinted in it.

Slowly I made my way upwards. Now the wind was growing fresher as I rose above the heights of the forest and the foothills that had shielded us from it so far. The sky above seemed empty and welcoming, thousands upon thousands of stars looking down upon me in the grand silence. The sense of imminent danger had not passed but seemed stilled by that sight.

Before long I had reached a plateau. From here, the stair continued straight upwards in a southern cliff, as steep as a ladder. As I climbed, some of the steps crumbled beneath me. Twisted grasses and the long, thin arms of weather-beaten bushes wound across the way—it had been a long time since this stair had been climbed. With some difficulty I reached the next flat level, now thousands of feet above the plains, and there, on top of the world, seemingly as high as the highest mountains—though in fact there were peaks on both sides which were taller—stood a strange upright stone, tall,

flat and featureless but for a single hole an arm's length across in its centre, looking out over the world below as though it were a window onto everything. It faced north and south, but the rock was so thin that almost the entire horizon was visible through it. It was hard to say if it was a natural wearing of the stone or the work of some forgotten race in the ancient past. It seemed smooth, but the smoothness had been worn away somewhat by the weather of many years.

'The Eye of Deldellu,' I said quietly to myself, in awe.

The wind blew softly through the hole in the stone.

I clambered up the remaining slope and looked through it.

Southwards, through a huge gap in the snowy, massive bulks of the surrounding mountains, I could see the plains beyond. Far off in the starlit night, right on the edge of sight lay a heavy blackness —either a dense mass of cloud or the looming shapes of other mountains. I could tell that, though it was a long way away, the blackness was very large. I trembled, wondering whether I was looking at the southern edge of the world, or maybe even the forgotten mountains where it was said that giant warriors slept till the coming of the end of all things.

I turned, walked round and looked the other way through the stone. From this height I could see a long way north, right across the Middle Lands, even, I thought, to the gleam of the Shandbound river beneath the bright moon. There, a little to the east, were the crags of the Mountains of Morning, tipped with silver. I gazed at them. They were like pictures from a dream, frozen in a frosty silence, so close that I felt I could touch them, but so far away as to be unreachable forever.

I suddenly felt again that great yearning that had always pulled at my heart: something in me cried out with a great voice. I tried to find words for it.

'Oh, Raendu,' I whispered to myself, 'where in all the world is my kingdom?'

There was a long silence.

I yawned. Somewhere in that wild emptiness a strange bird sang a single little tune and was gone. I slumped down by the stone and slept.

In my sleep, I lay looking up at the stars. A golden star, larger than the others, drifted out of its position and swam down through the sky towards me. It settled on top of the Eye of Deldellu, and I shielded my eyes from the light enough to see that it was a great Sword, the golden wings of its hilt almost white with brightness.

I stood up in the dream and heard the Sword speaking to me in words I did not understand, a song, full of a meaning that eluded me, the song of a sword: a shining, golden sword, embedded in the top of the stone, humming to me. I felt something on my head—a crown. I reached for it, but it vanished. The sword became dim, and all went dark.

What had this to do with me? I thought. I woke suddenly, feeling cold and alone on the high hilltop. Had it stirred something within me, or had I stirred it myself with my own yearnings? I wanted that golden light, I wanted it desperately—but it seemed to me that to gain it, to grasp that sword in my hands, I had to deny all that I had come to believe about the world. I had to be wrong.

I looked beyond the Eye. That way lay Wenfold, then, I thought. That way lay the Sword, I felt sure. But the blade of

that sword was two-edged, and would cut me deep. I turned from the road, and walked north, and the moment was gone, lost in the swirling pool of time.

In the east a paleness was growing, and the deep night was fading to a rich purple above. The climb down was more difficult, some of the steps had gone, and in the growing light the heights looked more dizzying. I paused on the plateau. Dawn now spread its glory across the Middle Lands and distant Shand, the greys, silvers and blacks of the night transformed into greens, blues and golds of the autumn. In a quieter moment I would have found it beautiful, but then my mind was full of dreams and darkness, and an unexpected urgency.

I could hear voices far below. Galatar was calling out for me.

But it was too late.

A leather thong suddenly wrapped itself about my ankles. I fell heavily and slid down a grassy slope, but was brought up short by the length of the thong, which began to drag me slowly upwards. I cried out, but as I did so I heard the cries of others below me, followed by the ring of steel as swords were unsheathed. Blade rang against blade. I heard a blood-chilling cry of battle from some strange, deep voice. I struggled to raise myself, but a black cloak was thrown over me. I was struck hard by something out of the darkness, and knew no more.

It was daylight when I opened my eyes. The cloak had been taken away, and the first thing I saw looked somehow familiar: it was a face, a man's face. I had never seen him

before, but I had seen someone like him. He was staring at me as intently as I stared at him.

I tried to move, but a sharp pain at the top of my head and stiff ropes around my hands and feet stopped me. I looked around.

I lay in the glade of a forest in early morning. Several shapes moved around me —dark men and horses, cloaked and hooded as though for stealth, but wearing the gear of war underneath. They were Shadowed Men.

The man who was looking at me, however, was not. He was dressed in the white furs and finery of a Valadrian warrior, but his hair was dark, unlike the fair hair that was common amongst that northern people. He was tall, and strong—but his face was twisted by a scar that ran across his lip and made his face sneer. He had a brooding look. Suddenly I saw through that, though, and said, before I could stop myself:

‘Cundria! You are like Cundria!’

He smiled, his sneer growing wider. He had an evil face, I decided.

‘You see in me the likeness of my accursed sister, as I see a likeness in you, my little one,’ he said. His voice was as smooth as oil. I knew that he too would have seen the picture that Cundria had spoken of, the painting made of Queen Valadria long ago, and that that was what he pondered, seeing it echoed in my face.

‘You make me wonder, little one,’ he went on, coming closer to me. ‘And in these times, when a man must as much watch his own back as that of his lord, any wonder that he finds must be well-used. What was the errand of your

strange company?’

I was silent and frowned at him. He placed the point of a long silver knife at my throat.

‘No matter,’ he said after a moment. ‘Whatever it was, it is finished. We have you, and they are scattered. But I’ll warrant that you were a thing of value to them, were you not, with a face like that? Do not fret, my beauty, I will not scar your visage as my sister scarred mine, long ago —your chief value, it would seem, is your face. You shall be shown to my masters, and that will scar you enough. Come!’

He hoisted me over his shoulder, laughing, and the bonds around my ankles were untied so that I could sit upon a horse before him. The whole party was readying itself to ride on. I wondered desperately what had become of the others. My captor seemed to read my mind, and as we went on he talked to me.

‘Your Company of the Crimson Banner was becoming a nuisance, my dear,’ he said, ‘and the Emperor crushes nuisances. His prince chose his best and most stealthy of fighters to follow you all into the wilderness and destroy you. You were indeed fortunate that you had crept away in the night, for we fell upon the others mercilessly. Those unslain were driven into the wilds for leagues: if they find any shelter again, let alone each other, it will be a miracle. And we tore their crimson banner to rags, and trampled it into the mud. We’ll show its rags to the Emperor as proof of our deeds.

‘But, my lady, forgive me! I am amiss in my manners! It comes from being too long in the Wild. Your pardon! I am Maedris of Valadria, loyal servant of Ranatar, Emperor of

Turgal, and his Prince Regent Baladac, soon to be crowned High King of Shand and all the West. My apologies for your discomfort —in times of war, however, you must expect some unpleasantness. Particularly if you fight with the losing side!

He laughed then and spurred his horse forward with the others. We rode down a long slope, under tall trees, winding down among boulders and across many swift streams, heading east, I judged, across the face of the hills. My head ached, and I was hungry, but I was also afraid, and suppressed tears of fear and a growing rage as we rode. Had the brief glimpse of light and hope which I had thought I had seen last night been but another trick? Where were the others? Did Cundria still live? And Galatar? And noble Ulforth? Would they follow me? I determined that I would not speak to this evil man, but I burned with questions, and he, guessing as much, tormented me with that.

It was not until much later that I learned what indeed had become of the others. Balladin, who had been on watch, had been slain by an arrow in the night; Wirrithal, the other watchman, had been wounded, and lay with the poison of the Carthog's arrow turning him cold for days. But Galatar and Ulforth and the others had fought wildly and escaped, to return to the dell and rescue Wirrithal. Colomain's healing arts were put to use then, for not only did the poison need healing, but Drenca had lost much blood from a savage leg wound, and there were many other cuts and harms. They had lost their horses, too, and much of their food and gear.

As soon as they were able, however, they buried Balladin

and did him honour, and Wirrithal was laid on a stretcher made from branches and cloaks, and they set off in pursuit. The way was easy to track: the enemy, no longer feeling any need for the stealth which had enabled them to draw so near to the Company, now rode openly and without fear.

Wirrithal was left with Drenca in an empty hunter's hut near the banks of the Tarrabelner, which the company now approached. There they nursed each other back to health, but were forced to abandon the main hunt, while the rest of the company went on eastward, up the banks of that mighty river, on its southern side: for, though I knew it not at that time, they had determined not to abandon me. They had left the road to Wenfold, and they were tracking my captors through the wilderness.

Had I known this I would have wondered at it, for my mood had turned blacker than it had ever been, and no act of love or friendship would I have understood. Something inside me was freezing over like black ice —as I shut out Maedris and his taunts, so did I shut out everything and everyone, and the world became a dark place indeed. The light of the Sword in my dream I put out so that it shone no longer.

As we rode along, though, Maedris did not treat me unkindly. Drawing far from the lands of men, as we approached the great Pass of the South between the Mountains of Morning and the Guardians, he loosed my bonds and I could walk freely when we were encamped. The Shadowed Men were his servants it seemed, and I learned that he was accounted amongst the most trusted of the Emperor's servants —at least, from his own mouth he was: I

knew no other speech, for Shadowed Men do not talk. He deemed himself safe enough, I guess, from me, a mere girl — but I also thought that he was not a little fascinated by me. In the growing coldness with which I surrounded myself, this was a cruel warmth — I had never before drawn the eye of a man in such a way, or, if I had, I had not noticed.

He was not an impolite man. I sensed in him some shreds of courtliness. But as time went on, even I could see that he had twisted these, making them bend to his wit, mocking or half-mocking each pleasantry as it was said or done. His scarred face, sealed into that permanent sneer, made it hard for him to be otherwise, I guessed — but I wondered what had happened between him and his sister that had led her to mark him in such a way. He never spoke of it.

We rode on for days, following the course of the giant Tarrabelner back up into the eastern wilds, until one day we left its side and took the road directly east, to the Pass. A huge gap opened on the horizon between the mountains on the left and right. Through it gleamed the light that promised other lands: I knew that that way lay Tara and Turgal and the lands by the sea that I had never seen and heard of only in song. I sat on my own horse now, riding next to Maedris, though still bound to his steed by a rope, and we looked out on that sight from a rise in the ground, and something lifted in my heart despite myself. He was ever perceptive — he saw that flinch behind my eyes.

‘So, Firehair,’ he said, using the name that he had made for me, as I would not tell him my real one, ‘your blood stirs yet at the sight of wonders and the promise of adventure! See, through that gap the world is different: the happy dreams

that they dream west of the mountains are seen as dreams. There, in far-off Turgal, Turgal of the fire-mountains, Turgal of the great forests, Turgal of the golden sands, you will see life as it is; you will taste the waters of reality, and, I hope, bless the mercy of the Emperor. Has not the way of Shand turned bitter yet in your mouth? It did with me, long ago. Do you not long for a place where you can be free of your soul's anxieties? Where your lord thinks as you do? Where you are not haunted by false promises from false gods? You will see it there, my little one, you will see it!

His words had a strange effect on me. It was as though he had indeed read my heart. I looked at him, but he was watching the horizon and breathing deeply of the fresh wind which now blew from the east, filled with the scents of spring. That same air invigorated me. What was he saying? Was my life in Shand, with all its darkness and its unanswered questions, merely a prelude to this? I shook myself.

We rode on for several days more. Soon we would be in the Pass itself. I had often considered escape, but it had never been possible, and now time was running out. While I was on this side of the mountains, if I escaped I had some chance of finding my way in the wild—but once we crossed into the strange lands beyond, I had less hope. Before another day had passed, I had to make my move.

The chance came at dawn. As the Shadowed Men stirred, and went about their morning preparations in the eerie silence of their unspeech to which I had grown accustomed, I slipped into the shadows of some nearby trees where the horses were tethered and released all but one, which I swiftly

mounted. In a matter of moments, I was away, galloping like the wind, stirring the other beasts to scatter into the wood. My captors did not find pursuit easy —I could hear the groaning cries of the Carthog captain and Maedris cursing as I disappeared among the trees— but I knew that they would be after me like the wind in moments, nevertheless.

I galloped for several miles, dodging branches and leaping the small gullies that twisted across my path, never daring to look back. As I went, a chill fear and a hot rage alternated in my heart and I spurred that poor steed on until he almost dropped. We had climbed into hills now —I did not wish to be seen on their crowns, and wound down into a small valley where I could hear a stream. The horse drank deeply, cooling his feet in the water as I waited, looking about me. I had headed west out of instinct, but beyond that, I had no idea where I was. I knew that I was many days ride from the Eye of Deldellu that I had found by chance on the morning of my capture; I knew of no other roads in this wilderness except for the one that led back through the Pass to the lands of the enemy.

I listened —had a bird called out then? There were many birds in the valley. But I thought I had heard one sing above the others. I could feel my heart beating within me. I dismounted carefully and drank. I had grabbed a sword as I fled, and now unsheathed it. The horse continued to drink — then suddenly he looked up and stirred: something had moved in the trees to the east.

I looked up and my blood froze —one of the Carthogs, breathless but standing tall, was slowly coming down the side of the dell ahead of me from the west. They had

overtaken me then; I was lost. My grip tightened on my sword.

Another Carthog came out of the trees to the south, then two more from the north, across the stream. They stood on the bank, waiting, swords unsheathed in their hands.

Maedris rode down from the east, looking splendid in his white finery, and calm, as though he had been for a ride for pleasure in the sunny morning.

‘My little one, what are you thinking of?’ he said in his smooth voice. ‘Such games are for the young, and you are now a lady! What manners have they taught you in these sleeping lands? Come, put up your sword. I would not want to harm you before I can show you to my masters.’

Something flared into fire within me then —it was as though the rage I had felt when Galatar had taunted me by the banks of the Tarthos far away had been fed by long months of slow burning into a hot furnace of anger. But the heat did not consume my skill; the passion I felt then seemed to hone all that I had been taught over that time into a fine sharpness.

The Carthog nearest to me was dead before he had time to think —I had swooped under his sword and severed his head from his shoulders quicker than a fish underwater. The others came forward, two clambering over the stream. I heard a cry of astonishment from Maedris as I weaved between their blades: two hands fell, bloodied and with shouts of pain and dismay, to the earth at my feet, followed by another head. I moved in a red dance, my sword like a long, deadly arm, stabbing and sweeping through them, while, in their slow and clumsy movements they seemed

unable to touch me. Fire such as I had never known burned in my soul —it was not formed around any thought of revenge, nor any fury at my loss, but flamed up as though it had always waited for its chance to do so. I let it have free rein over me, dodging, weaving, jumping and slashing like a part of it. Time burned like a living flame, red and swift. In a few seconds I was standing breathlessly in that glade with four dead Carthogs at my feet, the others fleeing. Only Maedris remained standing there, his face more stern and cold than I had ever seen it, his sword ready in his hand.

‘You, my nameless friend,’ he said, approaching slowly, ‘you play with great hazards. Put up your blade! I had wanted to show your face to the lord who awaits me in Tara, but I can just as well show it to him severed from your body!’

I did not reply, and instead, we fought. Our swords arced and curved and slashed in the sunlight as we danced around each other by the banks of that stream in the wild places. Never had I fought so much with sword before, never had I seen one so skilled as he —but Galatar and Cundria had taught me well: I knew the skills of Valadria and Turgal, as did he, and my balance was good. We had fought for what seemed like hours before he drew first blood from me. I looked down to see the redness flowing from a gash on my arm —I had not felt the cut, nor could I feel it now. I fought on, splashing across the water, reddening its pools and eddies. He followed me, breathing hard —I had the advantage of youth, I saw, and had not yet felt the fatigue that I knew he must be feeling. The fire that filled me replenished any strength I had lost as quick as thought, and I fought on without rest, parrying, thrusting, my blade

weaving a net of silver strands on the sunlit air as Maedris came on.

But he deceived me: driving me back, he guided me into the arms of a waiting Carhog who had hidden behind a tree. I felt the enormous hands, the overwhelming weight of his strength, falling upon me from behind. I could not turn, and fell beneath him. He twisted the sword from my grasp, and I felt the point of Maedris' sword at my throat.

The Valadrian looked down at me in fury, gathering his breath —then, as he slowly calmed, a smile played across his twisted lips.

'Well named are you, Firehair,' he said quietly. 'I hope your true name suits you as well.'

They hoisted me up then and bound me painfully with cords, putting me over a saddle. As I was led away east again, I wondered at my own deeds: in my first fight with a sword, I had slain four grown warriors and almost beaten Maedris himself, whom I judged would be accounted mighty among swordsmen. But I felt no pride in this: rather I was astounded, for as that fire slowly died, and the pain of my wound and the ache of exhaustion took hold of me, it seemed to me that another person had possessed me for those hours, and that I awoke from a dream.

But with my recapture, the world grew cold again: I lost all hope of seeing Galatar, or Cundria, or the others, and I resigned myself to what lay ahead, through that gap in the mountains that led to the lands of the Emperor, and my head swam with delirium as the blood dripped from me, and all went black.

Maedris now spoke less to me, and I was always bound tightly and fed by the dark hand of a Shadowed Man, and tied at night to a tree so that I hardly slept, and the rest of that trip was a nightmare. My wound was scarcely treated, and I lost much blood —so much that at one point I thought that I was on the brink of death, and I saw images of the father and mother I had never known looking down at me in my grave. But the wound healed on its own, and I salvaged what goodness I could from the hard and bitter food that they gave me, and slowly the daylight seemed bright again as I was carried through the Pass of the South and came out in the eastern realms, on the shores of the sea.

I do not even now recall my first glimpse of the sea. Maedris spoke of the Great Marshes which lay ahead of us, but I could not twist in my saddle enough to see them, for they carried me then as though I was baggage, slung over a horse on my stomach, sick and weary. We turned north, I thought, and passed into Tara, and my first sights of the land I was to grow to love were coloured by fever and seen from under a horse's flank. The meadows were green, though, and the winds sweet —the flowers were golden and white and blue, and the scent on the air was mixed with what I soon found to be the scent of the sea.

The sea, it seems in my mind, had always been there, shimmering around the edge of things as it sits on the old maps, formless and blue. As we rode through the high meadows on our way, I presumed, to Prince Baladac's camp, it glimmered below through trees, but I had been watching it for days, I was sure, before I realised what I was watching.

One morning I awoke at last to find myself indoors, in a

great stone cell, with a square of light high in the wall and a bowl of water nearby. My arms had been untied, and my legs, but they ached so much that I could scarcely move. The thick wooden door of the cell was firmly shut, and I lay there alone for many hours, thinking nothing.

After some time in which nothing disturbed me, and in which I might have been alive or dead, I gained the strength and courage to move, and found that I could scale the wall and peer out and down on the world outside through the little window.

There I saw what I was later to discover was Alathosa, chief city of Tara, and a great port, its blue bay full of tall ships. I had never seen a ship, and here were hundreds, of all shapes and sizes and colours, dancing with the tide in the warm sunlight of early summer. Though I could not see much through the tiny window, what I could see held me spellbound until the evening light outside told me that more time had gone by —and there came a grinding noise as the door of the cell opened.

Three armed guards entered —they were not Shadowed Men, but wore a livery I had not seen. I guessed that they were the Reavers, the warriors of the East, servants of the Morndred of old, the Dark Circle that ruled the Dark Isles. I was far too weak to fight them, and was weaponless and dressed only in rags. They dragged me out, saying nothing, and I was taken through a maze of passages to a great stairway which wound up and up, carved of white stone.

Here was a palace greater than Helca's Castle, I thought as I went —its ceilings were high and traced with tiny figures of leaves and woodland creatures, its walls were draped with

tapestries more beautiful than any I had ever seen. But everywhere there was the sign of the enemy's occupation: here and there a scorchmark, a fallen tapestry, a broken piece of stonework. Even my young and inexperienced eyes could by now tell the signs of recent war. This place, which I learned was called the High Houses of Tara, was now the central fortress of Baladac, Prince of Turgal, and the base from which he hoped to conquer all the western lands. The golden flag of his princehood was draped everywhere.

Up the great staircase we went, until we came to a large, dark room where torches burned. Evening stars shone down on me from high above: I looked up and gasped —there seemed to be no ceiling at first, but then I saw that great pieces of crystal had been set in a fine tracery of stone so that the roof was a window on the sky. This then was my first glimpse of the Star Chamber of Tara, one of the wonders of the world.

But my eyes were drawn back to earth sharply —a fist poked me in the ribs and I was forced to bow before a dark figure that I saw at the head of a long table. Maedris sat in white alongside this man. They both looked at me. The unnamed man, young with dark skin and dark eyes, rose and walked to me, lifting my chin so that he could look at my face. His face, as I looked at it in return, was cruel and savage, as though he had done many cruel and savage things, unrestrained. He was not much older than I. I kept on looking at him until he turned away. Was this the freedom that Maedris had told me lay east of the Pass? Was this the prince of the land of wonders who dwelt there? I was not sure what I thought of it.

‘What are you, I wonder?’ he said, with the same trace of Turgalin speech in his words that I had heard in Galatar — and I recalled suddenly that this was Baladac, brother of Galatar. He was tall — not as tall as the one he had usurped, but tall enough to be called a giant among men— but he was not as strong as his brother, I thought, nor as steady in his hands. He seemed too hot, too swift. I guessed that he was a fool, and that he followed others, wiser and darker than he, but I put all thought from my mind lest either of them read it there. I was weak enough, and wanted no more taunting.

‘My servant Maedris here tells me that your likeness is that of the accursed White Queen of the North, that witch on whose lands I am now poised to strike vengeance for the wrongs she did long ago,’ he went on, taking up a goblet that a servant behind him filled with wine. The Reaver soldiers stood at my side, firmly holding my arms. He came near me again. ‘I could well believe it. You have a witch-look about you. Your eyes are cold with that northern cold which they say runs like ice in the blood of its people. But whereso did you come by such a likeness? My masters will be very curious, my pretty one. Very curious indeed.’

He drank the wine, and studied me.

‘Maedris also tells me that you slew several of my other servants, and that you rode with a company of rebels, disrupting those lands that are now rightfully mine by conquest, and defying the Imperial Laws. I could scarce believe that, in one so young. What was the purpose of your company? Why did you ride with them? These are matters that concern me, you see. I will allow you the grace to tell me now, or I will extract the answers from your bleeding flesh —

I am not overly anxious how I obtain them. Which is it to be, girl?’

He leered into my face. I had no strength to spit at him, but he perceived my thought and drew back.

‘So be it!’ he said, angrily. He waved to the guards who held me and I was taken away again and thrown into the cell in which I had awoken.

That night was among the worst of my life. With the light had gone all hope, and all shadow of hope. I tried to steel myself against the coming agonies of the body, but it was no good: I trembled and wept in a terror all that night, and I could not think beyond the dawn when I knew they would come for me. I did not sleep, but drifted from waking dream to waking dream.

But they did not come with the dawn, nor all that day. No one came near the cell, nor was I fed. Hunger had followed me like a shadow for months now, so the lack of food did not concern me, but I wondered what evil was brewing beyond the tiny stone world in which I sat, and I cursed my own soul as the hours went by.

Here was the water of reality of which Maedris had spoken: this was what he had called the real world, and the dreams of honour and beauty that Shand had woven to taunt me were here seen as mere transparencies, through which no light shone but the great darkness of the void beyond could be seen. Here, in the pain and fear of an enemy’s dungeon, the world was truly shown to be merciless, meaningless and cold. And here, as that day went by, I felt that the freezing of my heart was done—for the fear of the pain to come opened only the door to numbness: if I could feel nothing at all, no

joy, nor love, nor hope, then perhaps the anguish of the burning and the horror would be made less, and I would die all the swifter and have done with this world of despair. Life was not to be valued as highly as I had thought —had I not killed others myself now? Their blood cursed me even more.

There was little point in praying to Raendu. Raendu was the god of light and wind and laughing children, and the god of the love of a mother for her child; he had nothing to do with me, and he did not dwell in dark cells far from any home I had known. Here the god was Gon-runin the Usurper, god of darkness and terror, and the power that seemed more real in that terrible place was the power of fear and pain. Night after all was stronger than the day; light struggled feebly to illuminate the void, but eternally failed.

Twilight showed through the bars of the window. Dim noises stirred in the city below.

When they came for me I was as ready for them as I thought I would ever be. In my heart, I thought, I had already prepared for death. I would soon be gone into eternal oblivion, and that in itself brought some relief. I had begun already to hate the world.

The door groaned open and I was dragged again through the High Houses and up that grand stair to the Throne Room. This time, though, I was led behind the Throne to a smaller chamber, lit by firelight from a brazier. There Baladac waited, and Maedris—but they were both dressed in curious black robes, like priests. They looked strange in the flickering flames. At one end of the chamber stood a tall shape, wreathed with a pale cloth. The guards released me and I commanded my trembling to cease and looked at them both

with as much defiance as I could muster.

‘All prisoners begin with that same look, Firehair,’ said Maedris, quietly, ‘but all are reduced from it to pleading for mercy and death at the end. And they all die: some more slowly than others. Defiance is the first defence, but it has no foundation. Why defy death? It comes whether it is defied or not.’

I swallowed, growing stiff but determined not to show my fear.

‘Bring her here, Maedris,’ commanded Baladac. Maedris took my arm and led me easily to where his master stood next to the shrouded shape.

‘Before we begin,’ Baladac said to me, ‘my lords have commanded me to show you to them. Do you know my lords, young rebel? I am sure you have heard their name: is not the name of the Morndred known and feared throughout Shand? For that is whom I serve—the greatest power in all Gandria. And soon, through me, all of Gandria shall be under their sway.’

He turned from me and plucked the cloth with a flourish from the thing it hid. I gasped: it was a mirror, seven feet high, dark and gleaming with hidden depth, framed with silver. In it, the firelight flickered back at me and the dim room was reflected—or so I thought, but, as I looked, I saw that perhaps it was not so. The room in the Mirror was somehow twisted, its light dimmed, and the figures I saw standing there were not quite the same as the ones who stood next to me: they were twisted too. Maedris looked taller, broader, stronger, and the sneer on his face was gone—but his beauty was a hideous beauty, a cruel loveliness worse

than the mortal sneer I saw on his real face; and Baladac was broader too, but his face burned with a leering fire. I could not long look at the images: then suddenly I saw myself.

I stood taller there, too —tall, and slender, robed not in rags but in ice-blue, crowned with silver. My face was truly beautiful, shining with a pale light; my long hair was almost white, as was my skin. But my eyes —my eyes were deep wells of crystal, chilled and sparkling like icicles in the moonlight. I could not breathe. I had expected pain, torture, horror beyond imagining —I had not thought that beauty could be such a torment. With an effort I turned away: but Maedris grabbed my head and made me look. I shut my eyes as I heard Baladac speaking into the Mirror in some tongue I did not know. The room seemed to spin as I fought for breath over the top of my terror.

But then something happened: I sensed that all was not as Baladac and his companion had foreseen. I opened my eyes.

The Mirror was still there, but the background had changed. In its glass, instead of standing in the chamber behind the Throne Room, our mirror-images stood in a red chamber, a larger room, and a tall black shape loomed behind. Someone else was there also, someone who lurked behind the standing forms of Baladac and Maedris, unseen. They were spellbound, I thought, either listening to a voice I could not hear, or waiting, or both.

Something in the Mirror was speaking to me, not in a voice of words, but in a silent song of the mind. Since there were no words, I cannot write any to tell of it —all I can say is that I was drawn into that blackness by a guiding presence. Deeper in and deeper I went, through layers of fog and

sheets of shifting glass, deep into the other world on which it was a window. I had drawn near to the dark shape that I had seen towering in the background of the Mirror: it was a black idol, shaped like a man or rather like an enormous child, its legs and arms too short for its massive bulk.

It was very black. It was as though blackness itself took its name and form from this thing. It seemed very strong and still, serene with a sinister silence that breathed away the tremors in my heart effortlessly, holding me entranced. Here then was the central darkness of all things; here was the meaninglessness from which all meaninglessness emanated, black, empty and soulless. An eternity of time seemed to pass as I stood there looking at it. I knew that if this were to go on, my soul would be lost.

But something stirred in it: there was a light in it, a pale light, like a tiny lantern, winking down at me from above. Like a solitary star glinting alone in the night sky, the eye of the idol looked down on me, and I felt momentarily as though I should worship that light as if it were greater than the whole world. I looked at it; it looked at me. In all the wide world of emptiness, then, there was a light. I must have it, I thought, I must. I desired that light; I yearned for that light. With it I no longer needed to fear the great darkness that surrounded it. It beckoned to me with an undeniable force. But even as I watched it was withdrawing from me. Its departure hurt me like a physical pain —I refused to be left again with the blackness that remained.

Then, as I looked again into the Mirror I could feel the eyes of the stranger burning into me, the figure who stood hidden behind Baladac and Maedris. I could not see his face,

but his presence was as real as that of the living, breathing men who stood next to me in the room. I searched the face of the Mirror for the eyes that stared at me so —but it swam now like a muddy pool, and I could make out nothing clearly, not even my own face. Once only, and for the briefest of instants, did I glimpse something: a pair of dark eyes looking back from the void straight at me. But they were gone as soon as seen —and I thought they were merely my own looking back at me, for they were full of a terrible fear.

Suddenly Baladac howled —a great screaming howl which filled the room and sent a horrible chill through me. He turned and took up a sword, swinging it high over the Mirror as though to smash it —but Maedris caught his arm and struggled with him, forcing him to drop it at last.

‘What are you doing?’ shouted Maedris, as they stood apart, breathing hard. ‘Have you gone mad?’

Baladac looked from him to the Mirror and back again like an unthinking beast, and then slowly a light returned to his eyes and he looked at Maedris and became calmer. But when he spoke it was as though he were still in a kind of trance or dream.

‘Did you not hear the voice?’ he said, in a whisper. ‘Did you not hear the irrefutable command?’

Maedris shook his head slowly. Baladac carefully replaced the cloth over the Twisted Mirror and stepped away, almost swooning as he did.

‘What is it?’ demanded Maedris. ‘What did it say?’

Baladac then looked on me. Never had I felt such a look of intense, unbarred and unmixed hatred from any mortal eye.

‘She...’ he began, but his face was twisted with that hatred

and he could not say the words. 'We are to withdraw from Tara,' he said at last, slowly and painfully. 'There has been a change of plan. They want her. They want her.'

I did not understand what he was saying, nor what it meant. All I knew was that something had struck Baladac to the core. He stood there burning me with a gaze so ferocious that I felt it like a physical pressure on my brow. But even then I did not cower from him: I returned his gaze. I recalled that, whatever our positions in the world at large, he was not that much older than I, and that were I but a queen in name, I would be his equal in all things —it seemed to me then that I might as easily be a queen if he were a prince.

Maedris clearly was taken aback —he knew not what he should say or do, watching the two of us stare at each other so. But after a few moments, he muttered:

'Prince, you and I must speak together. Have this slave taken back to her cell.'

Baladac looked at him as though in a trance.

'No,' he whispered, as though speaking from a great distance, 'no, not to her cell. She is to be released. Release her!' commanded Baladac. But there was no one else in the room to obey his command, and Maedris clearly thought that his prince had gone mad, and made no move towards me.

'Release her, I say!' shouted Baladac, struggling again with his companion. 'I am your lord! Do as I say!'

He flung Maedris aside and with one swift movement had a sword point under the Valadrian's chin.

'I give you the command of the gods as it was given to me!' said Baladac. 'She is to be released! And we are to withdraw from Tara at once! Do you hear me?'

I heard his words, whether Maedris did or not—but I know not whether because of the despair of the last few days, or the heat of that room, or the dark shadows of hidden terror that filled it, I swooned, and fell to the floor, and was adrift in darkness, and their voices faded to nothing.

INTO THE DARKNESS

*Deep in the Firevault, there lurks he,
Dragonlord they call him, Master of Three;
Stirring souls in a pit of fire,
Demon, sorcerer, tyrant, liar.*

-from The Book of Seven

Despite the command that Baladac had given, when I next awoke I was back in the cell whence I had been taken to him. Daylight beamed in through the small window. The first thing I paid any attention to—for my mind was as blank as unwritten parchment at that moment—was the great noise of people moving in the city below. I realised then that, when I had looked down on Alathosa before, it had been very quiet—a city subdued, suppressed, unnaturally silent—but now there was much shouting and confusion, it seemed. Far off I heard what might have been the sound of battle. I jumped up to the window but could see nothing except that the harbour looked very empty, and a pall of smoke hung over much of the city.

Then I noticed the first really strange thing: the door of my cell was wide open. It was as though I had been placed there for want of somewhere else, in a rush, and that whoever had done so had taken no further thought of me.

As a man who has been starving first tests the banquet he sees before him carefully, suspecting illusion, so I made cautious movements beyond the door and down the passage—but, in contrast to the city beyond, the palace was deathly

silent. No guard watched any of that dungeon, as far as I could tell.

Quietly, I made my way upwards. I found food in an empty guard's room, where the ashes of a fire still smouldered in the grate, and, being ravenously hungry, ate all of it before I went on. I took up a sword that lay there also. As I came into the upper halls of that place I still had met no one, though, nor seen any sign of movement—not even a rat stirred in the High Houses that day, it seemed. I went on, following, as best as I could remember, the way that I had been taken the night before: doors stood open, shutters swung in the light breeze—everywhere there were signs of hurried departure: food half-eaten, unpacked caskets with their contents strewn about, unlocked doors, embers of abandoned fires.

I found a room unlike any I had ever seen, where great ewers of water stood around a small pool in the floor. A furnace still blazed nearby. It was only from the pictures that decorated the walls that I finally realised that this was a bathing room, the inner chamber perhaps of some Taran princess. I had never seen one before.

Since I had yet to meet anyone, and since I still believed that my death was near whatever precautions I took, I decided to bathe there. The water was easily heated in the furnace, and the sensation of sinking into that pool eased my tired body more deeply than many a sleep. As I lay there, I began to recall Baladac's words from the night before: he said that he had been ordered to withdraw from Tara. And he had said that 'They want her.' I did not understand. Perhaps he had gone mad after all. But then the palace was empty—and

there was the Jewel in the Mirror, and my own image there.

It is simple now to look back on myself then and to admonish my actions: the gift and the curse of old age is the ability to be one's own puppet-master in memory only, long after the show is over. Would that I could reach back and alter my coming deeds then! But at that time, there seemed no other road to walk. Mayhap that was the case, and it only seems otherwise to me now, just as a walker, having reached the top of the hill, might look back and see other ways of approach which were invisible to him as he walked. Whatever the case, with the grime and the pain and the toil that that water washed from me there went also my youth, and when I arose from my bathing I had determined on a course of action which was to bring me to where I now sit by no other path.

For it seemed to me, as I lay there, that the power which had been revealed to me by the Mirror was what I had sought all my life. The black idol that I had seen was the evil image of the god Gon-runin, that I doubted not; but in the eye of that god I had seen light. In the heart of all darkness, then, shone a light, just as the moon shone down from the blackness of heaven. If the world were as empty as I felt it had become, then it was because the light that should shine forth upon it was held prisoner by the night. Large and strange thoughts arose in me then —I had visions unlike anything I had imagined, visions that I might be indeed a mighty queen, wielding a great light and dealing out power to any who would follow me, if I could but possess that shining thing. That this was possible I doubted not either — for it then seemed to me that I had seen that which had

remained hidden from all: I had seen into the heart of the enemy and discovered his great secret. I had seen the Jewel. That was why the Morndred remained strong no matter what was done against them; that was why the Dark Isles were in the ascendant; that was why the world seemed dark. They had the power of the Jewel: it was the very eye of their god. I had forgotten the Sword of my dream altogether.

In my folly, then, and in my ignorance of the greater truth which only now do I know, I was deceived —and the Morndred covered me with their lies, and drew me on as one would draw a beast with the promise of food. For my soul hungered for light, and to me it seemed that the Jewel was Light Itself —as I lay there, soothed and warm at last, surrounded by a silent emptiness, I could see nothing else in my mind but the burning image of that thing, turning.

I rose from the waters and donned rich white and blue robes that I found there. I knew that, despite my age, I looked like a queen then. What I did not see was how much I had already come to look like that image of myself from which I had shrunk in the Twisted Mirror.

When they found me at last, I was sitting upon the Throne.

They entered with drawn swords, carefully —for though they had found the whole place abandoned and silent, it was a strange day, and it seemed to them that great matters were afoot: who knew what perils lay in wait for them?

Ulforth came first, his blue cloak tattered and stained, his face weary. I saw him before he saw me in the shadows, and for a moment I pitied him, and I loved him: what had he and

the others endured in their pursuit of me? For even as he entered, so did Galatar, and Cundria, swords at the ready, searching the shadows with their eyes. Others followed: lords of Tara, I imagined, as I had not seen them before. Some wore rags, and had been imprisoned long, it seemed from their faces; others came newly armed, as though they had ridden in from war.

But all this happened in a moment, and as they entered I arose from the Throne, and my heart was suddenly cold—I knew, or thought I knew, how everything then depended on how I greeted them, and how they responded to me: for I had been given a task, it seemed: the destiny of this realm and of all others that I knew now rested with me. Love, it seemed to me then, had little part in it.

‘Hail, lords!’ I said—and my voice indeed sounded great, startling them as they looked up at me in my shining robes. ‘Who thus enters the chamber of the Mistress of Tara?’

Ulforth stopped and frowned, peering at me. The others were all still, astonished.

‘Ryna?’ Ulforth said. ‘Ryna? Is that you? In Raendu’s mercy, you live!’

‘The Ryna that thou knew is part of me, Lord Ulforth—and that part greets thee truly, and welcomes thee, and Prince Galatar, and the Lady Cundria,’ I said in the High Tongue, nodding to them and allowing the shadow of a smile to pass across my face. ‘But I am more than the Ryna that I was—and great deeds await me, with thy aid.’

I had not moved, but Ulforth and the others rushed forward. When they reached the foot of the dais leading up to the Throne, however, they all stopped: something in my

voice, my manner, my presence, halted them.

'Ryna, art thou well?' said Cundria, speaking also in that High Tongue that poets, and lovers and warriors in battle were wont to use, seeing in me the signs of greatness, I supposed.

'Lady of Valadria, know thou this —I have fought with thy brother, Maedris the Shadow-hearted, and bested him,' I said, 'and I have looked in the eyes of Baladac the traitor: but more than that, I have seen into the very heart of our enemy and grasped his secret. I have gazed on the Eye of Gon-runin!'

At that one of the Taran lords who had come forward with the others gasped, and said, turning to the others:

'The Eye? You have looked on Sterreth the Unquenchable? Where is the Jewel? Is it here in Tara?'

I looked at him, and I saw that I had about me some aura which quailed them all at that moment —for they had not expected to find this in the heart of their abandoned palace, I deemed.

'Nay,' I said, 'it lies in the centre of the Great Darkness, and is the well from which that night draws its strength. It is the star at the height of the midnight sky; it is the prize beyond imagining. And they ran before me, knowing that I had seen it. They fled this realm, and fled from me, and so shall they draw even further back.'

I could see the strange mixture of fear, puzzlement, wonder and awe in all their eyes then, as they pondered my words. I guess now that there was some love there also, but I was blind to that.

'What are you saying? That Baladac has burned his fleet,

and abandoned his armies, and fled, because of you?' said another of the Taran lords. They had all gathered now around the feet of the Throne, like courtiers before a queen.

I fixed this one with an icy gaze, and raised my hand. I think he half-expected me to reveal the Jewel in it, for he shrank back.

'Speak not so before me!' I said. 'For ye do not understand, and ye have not looked, none of ye have looked, in the face of the Mirror, nor seen the God, nor that which he guards! But I have seen, and I will go to him, and I will wrest from his evil face his most precious and powerful thing, and I will bring it here, and make Tara the greatest of the realms of the West, if ye will lend thy swords to my quest!'

A murmur went around the room at this, but Cundria had begun to climb up to me, her face covered with concern — for, though I knew not clearly what was happening, I perceive now that I had begun to swoon, and that the room had grown strange around me. I felt her catch me, and I heard myself crying out many other things, things I cannot recall —but Cundria took me away, and I remembered no more for some time.

A fever had overtaken me, I think, for when I next recall waking Cundria was at my bedside, sunlight streamed in through high windows on my left, and I learned from her that several days had passed. I learned also that much had been happening in that time from beyond the walls of that palace: Baladac had indeed withdrawn from all of Tara, as he had been commanded to do, and everywhere the people of that land were emerging from their slavery or from the hills

where they had taken refuge from their conquerors in amazement at the unexplained change in their fortunes. And, Cundria was careful to explain, as people will when they have no other explanation that will serve them, they had come to believe that a great princess had come among them and driven off the evil usurper from Tara with his dark gods. Rumours had spread almost quicker than new freedom in the city and beyond to the hills and fields: a youthful woman from a distant land had pierced the great evil of their enemy with her purity, and now challenged their god.

Though Cundria was careful to put this to me as a foolish thing, a rumour that the people believed for lack of something better, being afraid that I was perhaps still fevered, I saw also as she spoke that she had no better explanation herself for what had happened, and that part of the look in her eye as she looked at me was awe, or wonder, or perhaps fear.

It was folly, and perhaps wickedness, but I relished that. My heart grew warmer than it had been with her love, and the loving concern of Galatar and the others of the Company who had pursued me, coming to Tara to find the enemy in retreat and its people in disarray—but onto that love I spilled an icy inner scorn, feeling it as a distraction, a lesser thing, a thing that belonged to the old Ryna, the youth who had perished before the Mirror. That she was awed served my purpose; that I wanted her love more than I wanted her fear was a fact that I painstakingly ignored.

She told me of the Company's adventures: she explained that it had been decided that they must pursue and rescue me, for all the evidence pointed to the fact that my captors

were keeping me alive, and were probably taking me to Tara, to be judged before Baladac. The journey to Wenfold without me became pointless; Galatar's journey to Turgal was judged less urgent in the face of his concern for me. And so they had walked on, without horses, through the Wild, carefully tracking me.

They had come to the place where I had fought the Carthogs, and their concern grew greater—for Galatar thought rightly that I had been wounded in a fight, perhaps a brawl between the Shadowed Folk. When I later told him the truth I relished his astonishment.

They had gone on even more quickly then—Ulforth, Galatar, Cundria, Risaeon, Barragath and Colomain—fearing that I would be in peril of my life on the road. With great skill they had come undetected through the Pass of the South, and into Tara—but what they had found there surprised them. Hosts of Reavers lay in wait for the invasion of Shand over the mountains, and so the Company crept through the woods and into the high roads that led to the north, avoiding these enemies successfully, but the night before they had found me, they looked down upon an Alathosa that was in confusion—Baladac's fleet was sailing, and many of that prince's ships were burning, abandoned, in the harbour. This they could not understand. It was not until they came to the Throne Room of the High Houses that the truth began to be suspected—but the truth was even stranger, and posed more questions.

As soon as I was well enough, and at the urgent demand of Tara's chief lords, a great council was called in the Star Chamber, whence Baladac's golden banner had been

removed, and the many-coloured pennants of those lords hung instead from the walls. Tara had been purged: those Reavers who had been abandoned there when Baladac fled had been driven into the hills. The realm sat in an uneasy peace, for many other enemies lay in wait over the mountains in Shand—but many unanswered questions were creating greater anxiety on the streets of Alathosa. I came to that council with a heart still cold and wholly determined: I had become a true woman, I thought, and would act so to these noble folk. Nothing that they said or did would make me quail from what had to be done.

‘My lords,’ said Ulforth, who had taken charge of the meeting, but who had not questioned my sitting at the head of the table, ‘I come among you all as a stranger from Shand, and as the captain of the Crimson Company of Restonia, which Helca, the king of that land, sent forth to seek wisdom and aid in the war against our common enemies. And I have ridden through much strife, and seen great misery and turmoil, not least of which has been the pain of your land, Tara the Beautiful, which has long felt the burden of the oppressor. But among all that I have seen, I wonder most at that which I know also amazes you: that your land stood suddenly devoid of the enemy which has so long possessed it, without apparent reason. I came here with warriors great in renown, whom you now know—and not least of these is Galatar, the true prince of Turgal, whom Baladac, his usurping brother, has some cause to fear—but we came in secret, and in no force of arms, nor were we, alas, the heralds of a mightier host, hidden in the mountains and ready to sweep down into your land to rid it of its shadow. And

though he may have suspected that his brother rode with us—for he sent out pursuit on hearing of our quest, and one of our number was slain while others were wounded or captured—Baladac need not have so feared Galatar that he would abandon a whole realm in the dread of him alone. Yet, when we came to the gates of the High Houses, they stood open; and when we entered, we found this fortress empty. And this is a great mystery.’

‘Say not empty,’ said the lord of Tara who had spoken in the Throne Room, and whom I now knew as the Lord Anyae, the Earl Marshal, Warden of the realm of Tara, ‘for I walked with you into the heart of our citadel, and one sat there upon the hallowed seat of our Throne, which waits for the High King from the West—and she said words of wonder to us, and these words have now spread through the city and the realm, and all wait for their meaning to be explained.’

Ulforth nodded.

‘Indeed, my lord,’ he said, ‘the High Houses were not empty. On this matter, I must ask the Lady Ryna to speak, for she alone was witness to the events that took place on that night.’

He turned to me and I stood, robed in those same robes of pale blue and white I had worn when I had greeted them in the Throne Room. They glistened like ice and snow in the firelight, and I felt the keen eyes of all in that room upon me as I spoke:

‘My lords, you are welcome here, and I must first ask your pardon for my transgression—for on that morning when you found me in the shadows of greatness in the centre of your palace, my feet had led me in weariness and wonder to

that place, and I had sat unbidden on that great Throne, lost in deep thought of matters beyond my ken, before I knew that it was forbidden. Only when I saw you enter did my mortal eyes bestir me to see where I was in this world. But perhaps it was not mere accident which brought me there, for as you shall see, your finding me at the heart of this mystery was but the last of a chain of wonders which I will now impart.'

And I told them then of the old Lord Visaeon's tale of my coming to Restonia, and of my riding with the Company, of my vision near the Eye of Deldellu far away (which none there had yet heard, and which made Colomain the Minstrel Prince gape in awe); and how I came to stand before Maedris and Baladac and the Twisted Mirror. And I told them what I saw there: the dark idol, and the Jewel, and the shadowy shapes. I said nothing of the image of myself, cold, hard, cruel, dressed in pale blue and white, that I had also seen there. When my tale was done it seemed even to me that the tapestry of my life was tight-bound together, and that the skeins which had seemed to me before to be loose-woven and unpatterned were part of a picture now drawing to its completion —and it seemed also that at the centre of that picture shone a bright jewel. This, I saw, was how it appeared to almost all there, as I had intended, and it was a long while before anyone else spoke when I had done. Wenfold was forgotten, and the dream of the golden sword was unexplained, a thing of wonder that somehow lent weight to what had followed.

'Maedris your brother,' said Ulforth, turning to Cundria. 'It is as you thought then, my lady?'

'Aye,' she replied. 'I sensed his presence in that evil troop, though he was careful not to reveal himself to me in their attack. Long that score has remained unsettled. Who knows when our swords will cross again? For it seems he has fled with his master.'

'But my lady,' said Anyae, bowing to me, 'forgive me, but I do not yet see the workings of our enemies' thinking. Does any here have any answer as to why the Dark Circle would throw away a realm in the face of a young woman such as yourself? I speak openly, and with no insult intended.'

I bowed in turn to him: I could see, with my new eyes of statecraft and deviousness, that Anyae was strong among the lords of Tara: sway him, and I swayed perhaps them all.

'My Lord Anyae,' I said, 'I can only repeat the words that I heard Baladac speak: he had been commanded to withdraw from Tara at once. Maedris tried to defy him at first, thinking him, as would any warrior at arms, crazed. But his command held, or we would not be sitting here. Beyond that, I know not why my face filled them with such fear. But I say to you that with your help, their fear shall be well-founded.'

But even as I spoke, and Anyae nodded, hoping as I knew for some better answer but getting none and so being forced into contentment, I saw out of the corner of my eye the sudden passage of a look of understanding or abrupt realisation between Galatar and Cundria. Galatar was quick to speak.

'Ryna,' he said —and that he did not say 'Lady' irked me then for some reason— 'Ryna, what exactly did Baladac say as he struggled with Maedris by the Mirror? Is there not some other clue here in his words?'

In truth I think my mind had forgotten the chill words 'They want her' that had passed from his lips at that time, for I replied:

'Prince Galatar, I speak all that I know.'

'And yet,' said Cundria suddenly, in some way taking up the point that Galatar had tried to make, 'and yet, my lady, even in your own words and those of my lord Anyae, we came close to what may be the truth, do we not? For does not the answer lie in your face alone? Here I must say what many here may not know, and which I have not spoken, not knowing its importance until now.'

And Cundria spoke of the picture of Queen Valadria that hung in that distant realm, and of its likeness to my own face, and as she spoke a cold dread, colder than anything I had felt since I had looked into that awful Mirror, passed through me like a blade, and I shivered and faltered.

'And so Ryna carries Valadria's likeness,' Cundria concluded, 'and that evil which looked upon her through the Mirror has good cause to dwell in terror of that face.'

'For was it not that face,' interrupted Colomain suddenly, as a murmur of amazement and sudden understanding went around that table, 'was it not that very face which, worn by the great Queen Valadria, brought down the evil Enchantress long ago, and ended the Dark Winter? So should the Morndred fear it! But here is indeed a great wonder!'

They all looked at me then, and time itself froze over as they waited, even though it was but a moment before I spoke again.

My blood ran hot and then cold. I had lost the icy mood which had commanded their attention, and I strove

desperately to retrieve it. They must not listen to this! They must not! It was I, Ryna, that the enemy feared, not some echo of the past! Their words stirred I knew not what within me. I stamped hard on the rebellion in my heart and resumed control, turning their wild talk to my advantage:

‘So be it!’ I said, in a great voice which rang in the roof. ‘If the gods have seen fit to give me such a likeness as strikes terror into the hearts of our enemies, then let their deed not be wasted! If that is the weapon which has cleansed this land, let us wield it further! Let us voyage to the Dark Isles themselves and bring them down with it! Let us sail with this face at the head of a great fleet, and strike deep into their own kingdoms —and let us not return until we have torn their greatest treasure from their grasp!’

So did I speak at that time, and I will not dwell on that meeting further, for it was plain that many of those gathered there felt themselves caught up in matters too deep or high for them, and they had no better notion of why Tara had been abandoned than that which had been put before them then, and so no better plan of action than that which I, their apparent saviour, suggested. But others, in particular Galatar and Cundria, were not so convinced, and they looked at me strangely, with faces of deep concern and wonder —and their looks I, in my folly, resented, thinking them hostile, and assuming them opposed to my plans. When they spoke of the quest of the Company and the ride to Wenfold, I dismissed their speech, saying that we had ridden to Wenfold to seek the wisdom which had now been gained already —and they bowed to my will, but not willingly, nor

were they at ease, and this unsettled me. So I began to regard those whom I most loved as my enemies, and I watched them with suspicion, and brooded on them, fearing that they would somehow interfere with the scheme upon which I thought all depended.

And that was this: that a great fleet be mustered of all the Taran ships that could be made ready quickly, and that a great mighty host set sail in them as soon as they were able, with me at their head, sailing for the Dark Isles and the strongholds of the enemy, there to pluck out the heart of our foes and defeat them forever. It was clear, from speaking to the Earl Marshal Anyae, that this could be done —most of Tara's warriors had returned from their mountain strongholds, and many of the enemy's own, unburned ships had been captured and were seaworthy. The wisdom of the deed was less certain, but all thought in that land at that time swam around the question of what had happened to Tara, and why —and into that void, I walked like a princess or perhaps a goddess, firm and cold and sure of myself, and all the people cheered as I passed through them, and the lords of the realm bowed slowly to my will, and I was careful to heed what they had to say, but careful also always to turn it back to the great chance at hand, the chance, as I thought, to rid Tara of the threat of the Reavers and the Dark Isles forever and to claim light and peace for my own soul.

Thus was the thing prepared, and within a week over fifty ships stood ready to carry twenty thousand warriors over the sea on the quest. The Eye of the God gleamed in my mind at me from over the eastern water with each rising of the sun — I hungered for it, I thirsted for it, I craved it as a creeping

vine craves the light toward which it winds from the darkness. Without fully knowing it, I had let the light of that Jewel fill my soul until I no longer heeded even the light of day, and all my thought was turned to my lust for it, and I snapped at the lords around me with the ferocity of a caged beast, seeing my only freedom in that thing, freedom from darkness, freedom from emptiness.

Time was then as solid as stone to me, and I clawed at each day, wearing it down slowly to the next, as the great preparations were made ready. I would see no one who had not some part to play in this, fearing that, were I to be distracted, some other will would prevail over events and I would be lost.

Even Galatar, when he came to see me that day, only came near by announcing some errand to do with the fleet's preparation.

I spent much time in the Throne Room then—I did not sit on the Throne, for fear of offending the lords of that realm, or stepping too far too soon and spoiling my power over them, but I had a seat put on the steps. In this way, I see now, I was jealously guarding not the Throne but the room behind it and the Twisted Mirror that was shrouded within. They had asked me about the Mirror, and I had shown it to them, but it had remained dark and unmoving, and they had not asked about it again—but I wanted no one to go near it, fearing that they might see something there, I knew not what: something that might in some way threaten my schemes and plans perhaps. My mind was becoming even darker then, full of suspicions and fears.

It was a grey day when the Giant of Turgal came to see

me: a thin rain was washing Alathosa drearily, hanging like a veil between me and the city as I watched it from the high windows. He entered without bowing —why did these little discourtesies infuriate me so?— and approached.

‘Ryna,’ he said, ‘we must speak.’

I turned to him.

‘Have the scout ships returned? I saw no new ship enter the harbour this morning,’ I said.

‘I have no news of the scouts,’ he went on. ‘We must speak of what is happening here.’

I said nothing, but looked at him with all the pride and aloofness I had cultivated. But it was difficult to overcome so large a man with a look: he towered over me as he spoke, and I saw the deep concern in him that would not be easily moved. I wished briefly that I might go into his arms and be comforted there, as by a father, but the moment passed and I remained unmoving.

‘Speak,’ I said simply, looking away. He looked around. The servants of the chamber had withdrawn to the door. He spoke quietly, so that only I might hear.

‘Ryna,’ he said, ‘what has happened to you? What happened on that journey from the Guardians to Tara? What have you seen that has made you so cold? You are like a woman born of ice. This is not the fiery-hearted youth who challenged me in faraway Tarthos! Something has chilled your spirit —tell me of it, before it is too late.’

‘Too late?’ I said, turning to him. ‘Too late? In what way too late? It was too late that I was born! You look for what has chilled me? Look about you, Galatar! Is there not horror enough in the life of a single day in this world to chill the

heart of any mortal?’

He paused then: he had not expected me to speak with such venom, I think. Indeed, I surprised myself —the blood beat in me like fire at his words. He saw the flames in my eyes.

‘Then are you acting wisely?’ he said after a long while. ‘Have you taken counsel with yourself in what you now do and direct? Do you claim the right to thus order the lives of men, when the world seems so cold to you? And to what end do you command them?’

‘To no other end than life itself shall dictate,’ I said. ‘And as to my right, do you question it? None other has yet. The people of Tara seem happy enough to have found a saviour. Did not Baladac flee before my face?’

‘Baladac fled —why he did so, I am not certain. He is no coward,’ Galatar said slowly. ‘But I wonder if you know what it is to command men so. You found yourself sitting on the empty Throne —but who or what led you thither? I speak only out of concern, Ryna —there is much here that I do not understand. And much rests on it. You are directing a great movement of men on a quest into darkness which may end in disaster greater than you know, and which, even in triumph, brings uncertain reward. My own belief is that we should still seek out the wisdom of Wenfold, for what do any of us know of the enemy or his strongholds? What do you know in truth of that which you saw in this dark Mirror, of Sterreth itself?’

I wanted him gone from my sight, his words disturbed me so —but I could not command him to be gone. Words of any kind froze in me.

‘Sterreth has a history that is known in Turgal,’ Galatar went on, ‘even if it is forgotten in Shand. Colomain perhaps could tell you of it better than I —but it remains a thing of doubtful merit, some would say an evil thing. At least, it has served evil long enough to become so itself.’

I did not speak, and he went on:

‘In the age of the youth of the world, Sterreth was one of the shining stones brought out of the darkness of the Dragon’s caverns, and it was like an eye, but with the power to transform desire into truth, blending the darkness and the light of Raendu’s Dream. It had been brought forth to give to Kaela, the Lady of the Flowers, queen of that ancient land, as a gift —but it was held back, for others had become enamoured of its beauty, and also because they feared lest the Queen be angry for bringing forth that which should perhaps have remained hidden in the Dragonrealm.’

‘They took the Jewel then, and buried it deep in a hidden vault in the dark places —but when Malamirne fell, the walls of that mighty vault were swept apart in the cataclysm and the treasures that had been gathered were scattered across the earth. In later ages, the White Jewel was found again by the Dark Circle and became Sterreth, the Eye of Gon-runin, on the idol of that dark god in the Dark Isles. So blood and the darkness in men’s hearts have ever been wound up with it. Mayhap it is not evil itself —but things do become evil with evil use.’

I would hear no more, and I turned on him then like a caged beast which sees its prey come into the reach of its claws. I hardly knew where I found my words.

‘Evil? You speak of evil to me?’ I cried. ‘You do not know

to whom you speak! Do I not possess the face of Valadria herself? Did not that ancient queen look into the very heart of darkness? I tell you I have seen Sterreth with my own eyes, seen it shining in the face of the idol, seen it like a star in the dark heaven, revealed to me, and to me alone, by the Mirror. If it is evil, then so is all light; if it is perilous —ha! What could be more perilous than Life itself? I cannot live without it —there can be no life without it. Do you not see? Can you not understand? Night gathers all about us, but we have a chance to hasten a new dawn: Sterreth, stolen from its masters, will give us the power that they so long have held! The fleet needs to sail —it needs to sail on the morrow. We cannot —I cannot— wait a moment longer while riders seek the hidden wisdom of the mountains as you suggest. You cannot know what it is that burns within me while that light lies so far away! You cannot know!’

I was suddenly wracked by a flash of grief which rent me deeper than I knew or could withhold —I sobbed, clutching at the stone sill near me. Part of me felt ripped from some other part, as though I turned away from some beloved face into the unknown night. Galatar rushed to me, and I briefly felt his strong hands around me —but I shrugged him away, and walked a few paces. The lightning that had struck from some inner storm in my soul had passed as suddenly as it had come. I stood tall again.

‘Then the ice that you clothe yourself in is to contain the fire that burns there,’ said Galatar softly, ‘I see now.’ He paused, and I would not look at him.

‘If you are set in this course,’ he said after a long while, ‘then I must warn you that in the end I fear evil will come of

it. My heart cannot lend strength to this quest, though it reaches out to you in your own torment, Ryna.'

He walked slowly around me, so that I was compelled to look at him. I turned to the window.

'But you say that I do not understand,' he said gently. 'I, who have seen the love of a father sink into the hatred of an enemy, who have been scorned by all that I hold sacred and dear, who have wandered the world friendless and pursued by horrors that would freeze your young blood; I, who have seen love cut down by the sword so many times that I have wondered at the justice of the gods themselves and cried out in the night, alone —I know enough of these things. I know enough to deny the power of the Jewel. I will not sail with you. I have my own quest calling to me. Turgal groans for my return.'

He dared to touch me again, taking my face in his fingers and lifting my eyes to his. I held back tears only by turning my blood to glaciers.

'Do not be afraid of melting, my princess!' he said, smiling. 'We are all of us mortals in the immortal world. All winters thaw, and all waters run to the sea in the end. The others of the Company —Barragath, Risaeon, Colomain, at least— will go with thee. Cundria and I must sail south to Turgal. Ulforth will remain in Tara with the Lord Anyae, to attend to the ordering of the realm. I hope that I will see thee again.'

I tore myself from him.

'And I hope that I may see thee,' I managed to say. I felt so young, like a girl again. I needed my father then. Galatar, that shadow-father that I had almost had, bowed, and left

me.

Sometimes when someone leaves a room the room seems full of that which has been left unsaid. I could not bear the weight of it any longer. I wanted to run after him, to beg him to stay. I wondered that I could remain standing there without chains to hold me. But stand I did, and to lend me strength I made myself harder and thought darker thoughts—Galatar no doubt hoped, I thought, to dissuade me from my quest with this withdrawal of his. He would not. I would walk my own road, whether he followed or not. The Jewel had already claimed more of me than I had foreseen: I denied love even then. But I wept for hours nevertheless, sending my servants from me.

With the servants, however, went all that they had managed to overhear: a new rumour went around Tara before that day was done. Ryna, their new Mistress, was none other than Valadria herself, the Queen of the Snows returned from death to save them all. For had I not said, crying out in a voice that they had heard, that I indeed had the face of Valadria, and that that queen—and therefore I, the rumour made it—had looked into the very heart of darkness? They were only too willing to believe it. And, come the end of the rain, when the fleet at last was ready to sail, I was only too glad to have them think it.

It eased my own soul, and the storm that raged there, to hear them cheer when I emerged from the High Houses and rode down to the quays. And though not all the lords of Tara were of one mind, and there was some protesting of the deed, the fleet sailed, and I stood in the bows of the leading ship, tall and fair in the wind from the sea, and I looked

indeed like a queen.

But a queen without a heart —that, I had left behind on the shores of Tara.

The scouts had reported to me that no ship of the enemy had been seen in any waters around Tara, nor for many leagues out to sea. Taran ships had sailed as far as the first sights of the Dark Isles and found nothing moving on the ocean but themselves. Baladac, it seemed, had not only fled from Tara but vanished from the earth.

We sailed on. For the most part, the nobles of Tara were buoyed by the spirits of their people at first, and willing to follow me as though I were indeed a returned queen or a goddess. The fleet sailed close together, and the sailors and soldiers cheered when they saw me. But as the shores of their home disappeared, and the cold ocean swallowed all distance around us, they grew more chill, and sailed on in silence. I wondered what was passing through their minds — did all that I had said, and all that rumour had made it, now seem folly to them? I dared not look at them, nor into my own soul —I watched the east, and fixed my mind on the White Jewel that I had seen burning in the face of the idol.

So in time we came there, and a strange journey it was. None who had been to the Dark Isles could forget them; few had ever returned alive. The first islets rose from the sea like the fingers or gnarled and twisted arms of some underwater creature. Black and monstrous, covered in green and grey growths, and swarming with thousands upon thousands of birds. As we sailed closer, I saw that nothing could live upon these unprotected and sheer rocks but for those gulls —they

were stark, stony, unwelcoming, impossible to land upon. Colomain and Barragath told me that to the north and south lay other islands, flatter and greener, full of fields and forests, where the Reaver folk dwelt—but for now all we knew of the lands of the enemy were these great fingers of stone, grasping at our tiny ships as a giant might clutch at the midges of the summer air.

Nothing stirred around us but the ever-circling birds, crying out in their incessant screeches. Soon, sailing before a fair wind with the morning sun in our faces, we crossed straits to groups of other, larger islands. From one of these, northward, a thin trail of smoke smeared the sky, but there was no other sign of life. All now had drawn their swords, nonetheless.

I had never been to sea before: the vastness, the eternal motion, the scent of wildness in it captivated me and for a few days took my mind from its sad yearnings to see Cundria and Galatar and other weightier things, and tossed it wide on the world's oceans. The people of Tara were seafarers, and knew their ships as I had known horses—they tended them, guided them, prompted them and loved them as a rider does his steed. I drew comfort from their skill.

I also drew comfort at first from the emptiness of the waters. No enemy fleet lay waiting for us, as some had expected. We sailed on, fifty proud ships carrying a host of warriors fully-armed and ready to die in battle. But as time went on and that day grew old, and nothing came from the small bays and inlets at us, our flags fluttered emptily in the wind and our passions quailed. Where was the foe? What in truth had prompted him to withdraw from Tara? Was this

not indeed a trap on a grand scale?

The leader of the fleet, a young lord called Yarin, directed the ships into the silent and empty harbour of the nearest island for the night. The skies remained clear, the wind fresh: tomorrow he promised the first sight of the heart of the Dark Isles —Wormstone itself, topped by its deadly fortress, the Citadel of the Four Winds. Unassailable by sea, and the home of the Morndred of ancient evil, none could ponder that sight without fear. Unless we were to find and defeat the enemy soon, we would be driven back from its impenetrable harbours without once spilling blood. So had the Dark Isles remained strong over the years, drawing their power from the sea which surrounded them; even without the Jewel they seemed invincible.

I slept without visions, or any dreams of any kind. When I awoke, a few hours later, Yarin had already caught the swift tides and we were away east. I came up on deck, robed again in the bright blue and white which I had worn when they had first found me at the heart of their realm, and I called the lords together. Barragath, Colomain, and Risaeon attended me also.

‘Lords and people of Tara,’ I said as the light grew on the pale horizon before us, ‘we sail as you know into the heart of the night which has so long overshadowed your realm. I cannot promise that you will all return to Tara —but I will say this: that even if you die here, you shall be made immortal in song. For here, the history of the world, and of all things under the light of Raendu’s Star, changes; here, those who have yearned for the power to redress the great wrongs of the world shall find that which they have yearned

for; here, the power of the enemy shall be stolen from his Vault of Fire, and his god shall be blinded; the cruelty of the enemy shall be transformed into the hope of all men. We sail on to glory not only for ourselves but for all the Western Lands. Soon, not only Tara, but also Shand, and Rondar, and the Middle Lands shall be free from the enemy forever. I say this to you as one who has looked into the enemy's eyes and lived; I say this to you as one who makes the enemy quail in his deepest fortress.'

I went on with many other proud and stirring words. What I said need not be dwelt on here —it had its effect. Word spread by signal flag and by those strange unspoken messages which can voyage from mind to mind without words, even over the moving sea. The warriors of Tara were ready. They had their Mistress with them. They burned with revenge and something nobler than vengeance —they perhaps sensed that hope did indeed rest with them. The ships sailed on.

Wormstone —in what ancient time had it been named so? And what did that name truly mean? Before that day was out it loomed before us, and the hearts of even the most steadfast among us quailed at the sight. It rose from the waters of the ever-moving sea defiantly, as though challenging the ocean to erode one tiniest fragment of its hard, black rock: sheer, dark, sharp and massive rose its cliffs, face upon face of climbing stone, its topmost peaks wreathed in cloud —but even through that cloud we could see that which lived in the nightmares of the West, that invincible fortress with its towers that seemed like extensions of the rock in which they were set, the Citadel of the Four Winds.

It sat so high that the clouds swept by beneath it; a thin rain cloaked the harsh black stone of its foundation in a grey and dismal sheet, dampening our sails and pennants as our ships drew near. Our fleet looked suddenly very small and weak before that sight, and my own heart turned chill. For the briefest instant, I wondered if Galatar had been right: I wondered if what I had glimpsed in the Mirror had been false, and that my coming here had been a trap. The mountain before us was so huge, so insurmountable, that no host of Tara, or Shand, or any realm that I knew could ever hope to overcome it; the men that we had brought would scarcely be enough to shove open its door, even were they able to climb that far. Cold dread, deeper than the sea, swelled over me.

But only for an instant —for was not the sea silent? Were not the walls of that evil place empty? Not even a sea-bird cried out in that space; the rain washed down through a dim and quiet sky. I looked around at our fleet. All the faces were upturned and pale; all were shadowed by the black mass before us. This was a sight that but a handful of them had seen before —Yarin, for all his youth, had been one of those, captured as a child and a slave of the Reavers for two years; he had escaped when the ship moving him to a western island had foundered in a storm, and he had been washed ashore in Tara. He had looked on Wormstone, and his face was grim now as I looked upon him at my side. But no one said that sailing here had been folly: no one looked at me. Their eyes were held, as if by a spell, by the tall, climbing cliffs of that island, and for a long while nothing moved or spoke.

I stood suddenly in the bows of the ship and raised my hand. The songs say that a great light shone out from me then, as though Raendu himself gave me blessing, and that the whole host was turned by that sight and their spirits uplifted. In truth, the light did not come from me—but, by chance or by some unknown design of the gods, the clouds above and around us parted at that moment and a thin ray of light bathed the sea ahead. It caught the metal of our swords as we sailed into it, and it warmed us. I said nothing, and did nothing but stand there, and even to myself now I see why the minstrels made so much of that moment, for I think to myself that I had, up until that time, not been braver. It seemed to me that the Jewel waited, and I can see that working in my heart back then, but despite that there was indeed something else. Something flared up in me, something hot and strong which was not a mortal passion or a lust but a fire of an altogether different kind: I was filled momentarily with a glory that I could not name.

And so we sailed on, right under those black cliffs, and my eyes made out a winding road that led upwards across their face, carved in the solid stone by unknown labours. There was a harbour of sorts there: a mighty windbreak of out-thrust stone had been pushed out into the sea to offer some protection to ships, and into its embrace we rowed, mooring the fleet and disembarking in our thousands onto the dark and deserted quays.

For still nothing moved. Even the hardest warrior there was beginning to shiver with uncertainty—where was the foe? I could feel their thoughts around me—it was imperative, I thought, that we move on and up that dizzying

road before the shadows of these fears gripped them all too hard. Yarin and Barragath came with Colomain, Risaeon and myself to the head of our army, and we wound our slow way upwards to the unknown that awaited at the top.

There is perhaps no stranger place in all Gandria than that island: no other place where the very stones seem so alive and watchful. They are black, dark as soot, coughed up from the black pit of the earth and cooled by the chill waters of the sea; but they are of weird shape, as though they were frozen suddenly, while still writhing and twisting with molten heat. Fantastic forms revealed themselves to my eyes in those cliff-walls as we walked on —some seemed like leering faces, others like bodies in torment, yet others like twisting shadows out of some feverish dream. The walls loomed over us, great curtains of unmoving stone; and as we went on, we came to corners where the road, no more than twenty paces across at its widest point, curved abruptly round and continued upwards steeply, leaving us staring down briefly into the unimaginable depths of the sea far below. I do not know how long we climbed —it grew dark as we went, and none had given thought to the night, and as the sun set in the far-off west, and we looked out over the clouds as they were touched by its flame, we suddenly yearned as one man for our homes there, and it seemed certain to us that we had come to die here in the black centre of the enemies' realm. Why had we not thought of the darkness? Why had we not waited for the new day to begin this ascent? It was to our minds suddenly the most incredible folly that we should find ourselves perched halfway up the road to the enemies' fortress with night coming on. I had no answer for the fearful

questions that I sensed were racing through the minds of those lords around me —I was convinced myself then that we had all been enchanted, and that our footsteps led us steadily nearer to our deaths.

But it was not so, or I would not be writing this. We came in the end through the horror of that long and cold climb, curve upon curve of the road leading through the clouds until we emerged onto a high plateau as the midnight stars voyaged over us. There, whether it were wisdom or folly, we camped, and gathered our whole host behind us. I did not sleep that night, nor did many in that army, but they needed what rest they could get, I deemed, for we knew not what terrors we would face with the new day or even before the next dawn.

And yet the enemy came not: he had the flower of Taran manhood in his palm, ready to be plucked and wasted as one might pluck and toss away a weed in a garden, but all that night nothing stirred, and only dim sounds echoed to us on the wind, like hardly-heard voices calling from some pit under the earth in a land far across the sea. The great Citadel of the Four Winds was visible above us now —I could see its topmost towers, bleak and bannerless, against the stars. The air was very chill. I looked down over the brink of the plateau. Far below, a remnant of our host stood guard over the ships, but the vessels floated like twigs in a pond, so far away, so unreachable, were they. All hope of returning to Tara had now fled from the hearts of many there, I knew. It was hard to say what went through my own mind at that time. The glory that had filled me as we sailed into that dark harbour had poured away as swiftly as it had come, but the

void it had left in me was not so much filled with fear as with a sense of waiting. Something waited for me at the top of that road —whether it was the Jewel or my death, or whether these things were the same thing, I knew not.

Often the event that is dreaded but does not happen is worse than the event which takes place and can be confronted. All that night and all through the slow-coming dawn, nothing changed except for the brooding light in the far-off east. The enemy played upon our fear, I knew that much; that we were watched and that they knew that we were at their mercy needed no words to give it shape in the minds of all that host. The terror of expectation doubled the size of the enemy's power and trebled the horror of our approaching deaths. But I watched the sun emerge from its cradle in the eastern ocean, and I wondered what lands lay beyond that horizon where no Taran sailor had voyaged, and my heart warmed slightly with the wonder of it, and I prayed to Raendu to give me the strength that I would most certainly need for what lay ahead —and it seemed to me that, on the wind that rose with the sun, there came a scent of wild places untouched by the darkness of this island or its rulers, and I was gladdened.

I stood on a rock in a high place there, and addressed all that could hear me, as the first rays of the sun smote the topmost towers of the Citadel above us.

'Know ye this,' I said in a great voice, 'that Raendu's Star rises out of the east that is untainted, and that the very foundations of the island on which we stand are rooted in the land beneath the sea that was once Malamirne, Land of Living Light, where the gods themselves would come. I call

on Raendu, and Kaela of the Flowers, and the Green Lady, to guide us in the gloom of this place, and to bring us either to our homes or to that greater home which the gods eternally prepare for us. Let those who would not walk into this citadel of our foes with a brave heart turn back now without shame, there to wait with the others by the ships; but let all those who would walk the same road as I now follow me! When Yarin blows on his great horn, then and only then shall we turn back —and let those who watch the ships prepare to bear back to Tara either the news of our glorious deaths, or the greatest treasure of the enemy's that any ship ever bore!

So saying, I walked on, paying no heed to the ordering of the host that followed, nor indeed wondering even for a moment how many had turned back: for a fey mood was upon me then, and a not-altogether evil one —a mighty passion filled me. It was not only the lust for the Jewel that drove me on: great deeds were here to be done, and I felt as though I would walk single-handed into the fortress of the enemy even though all of them should turn back behind me.

My steps thus led me to the gates of the Citadel, sword in hand, one tiny mortal woman against the darkest powers in all the world.

THE HOLLOW KINGDOM

*As sunlight or starlight so it seemed
Sterreth seared the sullen sky, scorching
The souls of those who stood silent, serving
Its wielder, white and wondrous like a
New-born storm in the sky of the gods.*

-from The Song of Ryna

Stranger still lay the sight before me than any I had expected to see.

The road had swept up steeply from the plateau, and from that high place I looked out across the new day. North of me rose the great bulk of the Citadel; south stretched the limitless sea —somewhere in that direction lay Turgal, and I thought briefly of Galatar and Cundria, and whether or not they thought of me. Eastward the sun now rose fully above the horizon from unknown realms; westward lay the whole world that I had known. Aptly named was this Citadel, I thought, for it looked out on the whole of Gandria, and the news of the doings of every land in the world must be brought there by the winds that whipped about its towers.

Walls a thousand feet high reared up from the island's peak, and the stones about me bore traces of snow, so high had I come. The walls were pale, reflecting sullenly the gold of the new sun, and no window opened in them —but there was a gate, and I gasped as I looked upon its might, and I wondered as I saw that it stood open.

Was I to be allowed to walk unopposed even into this, the

heart of the realm of the Morndred? Did those dark wizards have such confidence in my lust for the Jewel that they thought I would not suspect a trap? My thoughts whirled. I turned then, to see Barragath and Colomain coming up behind, an equal amazement in their eyes.

‘My lady,’ said Barragath, ‘you must see now that the enemy draws us on into a certain death.’

‘Or his fear is as yet unplumbed, even in our hopes,’ I said—for in my folly my mind had leapt ahead of Barragath’s words. Colomain looked at Barragath, and at Yarin who had come up to us with the leading party of soldiers.

‘My lady,’ said Yarin, ‘will you at least draw back from the walls? We know not what devilry lies in wait for us here.’

I looked in all their faces.

‘We stand naked before the enemy in his own land,’ I said, suddenly. ‘No battle or bravery in arms will save our lives should he wish to take them. What difference does it then make whether we stand here or go on?’

Barragath nodded unexpectedly, still peering up at the walls.

‘I would at least say, even in death, that I walked under this gate of my own will,’ he said. The others thought for a moment. I did not wait for them.

‘My lady!’ cried Yarin, as I stepped forward. I turned to him.

‘Lord Yarin, I know that you do your duty in attempting to protect me from evil,’ I said, ‘but this duty has limits—not least of which is the foolhardy and rash spirit of the one you seek to protect. I will walk under this gate before it is slammed shut in my face, and if I walk no further, then,

Colomain, see to the songs that will be written of that alone. Come! Walk with me!

They yielded then, and followed me, and we came under the great shadow of that open gate, worked with intricate designs and embedded with dark gems, and we were inside the Citadel.

How foolish we were in all of this! How could it have been otherwise than a trap? And yet, since Baladac had left Tara suddenly and without explanation, it seemed all Tara had gone mad in its unexpected freedom: that whole quest, they must have seen, had been doomed from the start. Were we all enchanted? What is the spell that can so bind a mortal's heart that great folly becomes adventure, and despair seems like hope? I wonder if all enchantment is not merely the workings of a single spirit, turning the world in its hands. Whatever the case may be, I, Ryna, Mistress of Tara, walked of my own will into that place, with Barragath and Colomain and Yarin, and the soldiers of Tara who came behind, among them Risaeon of the Company, and we looked upon the secret stronghold of the ancient foes of Tara and the West.

Its vastness and its silence stilled all our hearts. I could not take in then, nor describe now, the courtyard in which we stood, nor the numbers of towers that stood about it, nor the rich colours, red and pale gold, which adorned the many walls. Hundreds of doors opened from that yard, but one door beckoned, open.

I did not pause. A sudden impatience took me, and I strode on. The others, either feeling the same urgency or fearing to lose me in that maze, came on behind.

Through that broad door and down a long passage I went, Though the light of the sun had shone down into the courtyard, here its light was lost —but I noticed with a sudden chill that the wall brackets held torches, and that these burned with fresh-lit flame. Still I went on.

My feet, it seemed, were being guided —I came to many turnings in the passages, but ever all turnings but one were in darkness. The long chain of torches led me on. Through that vast labyrinth I went, breathing in the dust of the centuries, and nothing stirred but for the flickering flames and the shadows they made on those mighty walls. Many of those corridors were vaster than any hall I had ever seen or dreamt of, but I determined not to be distracted from my course by any wonder of stone or wood or dark workings of hands unknown, and I went on. I had the strong sense that time was running out, and that the road I had chosen to walk closed before me steadily, narrowing my path. The silence was almost tangible; the feeling that we were not only watched but guided like beasts led into a winding trap, grew with each step. The host that we had brought with us Yarin arrayed behind us in order, leaving troops in each courtyard to guard our return, but we all knew that this was mere show, and that when the trap was sprung, no amount of swords would save us.

As we went deeper into that place we climbed — sometimes by great stairs, sometimes by slowly rising roads that wound through pillars and terraces uncounted. The Citadel was a city in its own right —occasionally sunlight would suddenly descend through some high shaft to illuminate a stone figure, or a blank wall or a courtyard —but

more often we proceeded in darkness lit only by sparse torches. I began to see what it was about the place that was evil: at first I had been struck by its awesome beauty, but as I saw more of it I saw that that beauty was perverse: carved figures twisted not in passion but in pain, or perhaps a strange mixture of both; pillars were filled with dark designs and writhing letters in unknown tongues; courtyards were empty of trees or of anything green or living. In fact, I had seen no living thing, I realised with a shock, but for our own troops, since we had set foot on this forsaken island: no bird, no tree, no blade of grass. Wormstone was stone indeed —I wondered if even worms could live here. This whole place was a glorious monument, but a monument to death and emptiness.

But even as I thought this, something moved in the corner of my eye, and I saw a robed figure scuttling for the shadows on my left. Sword in hand, I pursued it, closely followed by Barragath. Red robes swam and vanished before us. The figure —a man, I guessed— had disappeared around a doorway into a dark chamber. Cautiously, Barragath and I entered that place. No torches burned there and it was difficult to make out anything in the darkness. The dim light from the doorway extended only twelve feet into the room.

Suddenly, Yarin came up behind.

'My lady, they are upon us!' he cried. 'Our men in the first courtyards are beset with Reaver foes —they are surrounded! It was a trap after all!'

For a moment I refused to believe his words —but then the dim noise of battle drifted to me through the dark silence of that place, and I saw the messenger who had brought

Yarin the news with a bloodied wound on his brow. My mind burned with many thoughts —I did not wish to abandon my quest, but neither did I wish to have all these loyal men slain. I agonised between choices —but the choice was suddenly removed from me: a flame reared up in the darkness of the chamber ahead, and arrows came at us from somewhere beyond. We slid aside and crouched by the door. Barragath had his bow ready, an arrow fitted to the string, his keen eyes searching the darkness.

Nothing more came from the chamber. I turned to Yarin.

‘Very well —we are caught,’ I said. ‘Take what men you have and fight your way as you are able back to the ships. We of the Crimson Company will remain here. If you should find your way back to the lord Anyae, tell him that the reign of Ryna was brief, but glorious. Do not wait for us beyond noon of this day! Go!’

Yarin bowed, and, taking the messenger and the few men who had followed us, he was gone. Never had I been more certain of death till that moment, but the certainty did not chill me —my heart hardened and I gripped my sword. I nodded to Barragath, and, as Colomain and Risaeon guarded our rear, we plunged through the doorway into the darkness.

Ahead, someone had lit more torches. A passage stretched away from us, leading even deeper into the fortress.

Carefully, I with my sword ready, Barragath with his bow, the other two following, we made our way down that dim corridor. As its walls closed on us, the sounds of battle behind us died, and I wondered if Yarin had reached the men outside, and whether he would live. A wave of tears swept over me —I had brought them here, I had led them all to

their deaths, I was the cause of this: I cursed myself bitterly, but choked back the grief and hatred as we went on.

The passage led to a dark hall, then on into another maze of passages. I had lost all sight of the red-robed man. Then, quick as blood, the figure dashed across our sight again, as though taunting us, and I leapt after him. He wound in and out of the pillars of a large corridor, looking back to make sure, it seemed, that we were following. Was it a man? The face above the red robes seemed hideous, not a human face at all. I shivered—but then saw suddenly that it was a mask, of metal or wood, made into the form of some kind of leering beast.

We pursued him. He was very quick. In the scuffling chase that followed, I blundered further into the maze of corridors and turned to find that I had lost Barragath and the others. I had no time to be afraid though—I could see the man ahead, looking furtively around him as though he believed himself unobserved. He was dressed, I saw clearly now, as a priest of some kind. He was doing something with his mask near the wall—I could not quite see what in the shadows. He was at the door of some inner chamber. I felt that I was close to the heart of that place now, and wondered how I would find my way within. This might be a trap, I thought, but for the moment I had this priest of the Dark Circle unawares.

I leapt from the darkness and had him in my grasp quicker than he knew—but my hands were twisted as he turned more swiftly than I would have thought possible, and my feet were kicked out from under me. I fell, with him on top of me, and felt his hard hands around my throat, the ugly

mask leering down at me with its demonic smile. I thrust upwards as hard as I could, but he bore down on me still. I thrust again, knowing this time that my sword had now pierced him twice, but his hands did not loosen on my throat. Even in the pain of his death, I thought, he was obsessed with my murder. Desperately, I rolled aside, and his dead body finally collapsed. I prised his fingers from my throat, and looked about me.

The wall of the chamber glistened red and wet with some kind of running liquid before me. I put my eye to a crack in the door and saw a thin red flame burning within. There was no sign of Barragath or the others, and I dared not cry out.

I fingered the blade of my sword lightly—it was still hot with blood—and peered again through the crack in the wall. Growing sounds of the battle came to me from outside, but the room beyond contained only the hiss of the red flame burning in the centre of a dark, oily pool. I took the hideous helmet from the priest and placed its misshapen visage in a face-shaped indentation in the wall: there was a click and a creak as a stone panel slid open—I had guessed right: the mask itself was a kind of key. In doing obeisance to whatever lay within, placing his face in the wall, a priest would gain entry to the secret sanctum.

The air in the inner chamber was surprisingly chill. I placed wedges of metal from an old broken torch-bracket under the door so that it would not close behind me, and slowly went forward into the gloom, shivering. Edging around a dark pool in the centre, glinting black and red with oil burning on its surface, I stood finally before the black idol, looming fifteen feet tall, standing alone on the smooth

featureless floor.

Here was the idol of Gon-rinin itself, as I had seen it in my vision in the Mirror —here at last was the object of the quest, the source of the endless night that choked the world.

It was shaped like a man, or rather an enormous child, as I remembered it —the limbs seemed short and fat, the face too round. Of its features I could make out only a shadowy blackness —but where its right eye should have been, something shone, something white and small.

I trembled with the cold. The air in the chamber was unmoving, and my breath seemed to hang before me —I drew my cloak tightly around my shoulders. It had been my design to leap quickly onto the statue, prise out the jewelled eye and leave swiftly, but I stood there for some minutes unable to move. My limbs were heavy and numb with cold; my gaze was held by the unseen face in which the white eye glinted.

There came a slow and harsh scraping behind me which startled me and I turned to see the stone door closing despite the metal shards I had placed beneath it. With a click it was shut, and I was trapped. A wave of fear washed over me, but in a moment it was gone, and a calm, dull heaviness and absence of thought overtook me.

There was nothing else at all in the chamber. Walls and floor were a blank, dark emptiness. Only the round pool with its burning flame and the solitary idol stood there. My eyes, which had been growing accustomed to the darkness, now grew dim again; I felt myself swaying. My feet would not move, though, and I fell in a swoon before the idol's massive feet. Straining under some unseen, unknown weight I lifted

my head, but it seemed an offence to me now to move — fitting it was, rather, to lie at the feet of this mighty god, he whose name was spoken in dark prayer or in secret, fearful whispers, across the scattered islands, in hidden places, at night, by those desirous of power, by those who wanted the forbidden, by those who heeded dark voices.

I muttered words I did not understand —part of a chant, I thought, a prayer for aid, for the blood of enemies, for the fulfilment of hunger— and my breathing became hard. I closed my eyes for a moment, and, opening them, saw that where before there had only been a blank and cold floor and barren walls there now glimmered a faint and pale tracery of intricate designs, slender serpents of light, weaving tapestries of strange, unnatural shapes, forming a rich pattern of subtly moving lines across the ground and up the cold stone walls, shimmering.

Still the idol stood there, blank in its blackness.

Then I heard a voice calling to me: it seemed to come from under the floor, and it did not speak my name but summoned me nevertheless. It offered everything but asked nothing, welcoming me into an oblivion somewhere in a dream or nightmare, somewhere deep, beyond help, under the earth. I knew that voice —it had been calling me all my life, in the night, when I was alone, locked within myself, afraid —it was the voice of the darkness, beckoning me to become part of it forever. It had called me from the road to Wenfold, and I had followed; I was following it now. I rolled painfully over on the floor and the voice changed: lighter, more piercing, and it called me by the name I knew:

'Ryna! Ryna!'

A sharp thud accompanied the cry. I opened my eyes. Someone was hammering on the door of the temple, calling to me, someone human. My mind leapt back from the abyss into which it had slipped, and I was suddenly awake. I stood, but fell against the statue, dull and heavy. Gripping its cold stone, which burned like ice, I clambered up its smooth surface, shaking free of the whispering deceit in my mind.

‘Ryna!’ called Barragath from outside. ‘Quickly! They’re coming!’

I now drew level with the face of the idol. I could see no features there but the reflection of my own face stared back at me, twisted into a horrible leering image of itself. This was no deceitful beauty as I had seen in the Mirror, but the face of the horror of a soul gone rotten. I looked on it for a second and my breath was stopped—I had seen that image before somewhere, in dreams perhaps, or some dark place under where dreams were made. My grip faltered; I grasped the white jewel and fell backwards—it came away in my hand.

Just in time—for rising from the head of the statue a small black creature moved against the dim network of light behind, a spider-thing, or maybe a withered, scorched hand with some kind of life of its own. It had a sting. I dared not move from the floor where I lay—the creature dropped with alarming speed down the sleek face and body of the idol to its great feet. There it sat, hard to discern against the light-tapestried floor, creeping on many legs maybe, or still. I could not tell.

It sprang for me. I rolled out of the way and stood up. In the firelight I saw it turn for me, and heard it hiss. To my dismay I saw my sword lying some yards away where it had

fallen when I had swooned. The spider-creature moved forward on its finger-legs, slowly.

Something felt cold and hard in my hand; I had the Jewel. Desperately, without hope, I held it forward, not knowing whether the creature hungered for it or feared it. It stopped, and hissed again, and its sting reared up behind it like a scorpion's, ready to strike.

There was a noise like scraping thunder. The door opened. Grey and red light flooded into the chamber. The creature leapt for me. In the same moment there was another sound, the swift sound of a flying arrow, and the creature, in mid-leap, was plucked from the air.

'This way, Ryna!' cried a voice. Barragath stood there, fierce and large and alive in the doorway. 'Quickly!'

I grabbed my sword, not looking back, and ran for the door. As I did, the floor fell away beneath me silently. I leapt—Barragath caught me and pulled me through the door as it shut on its hinges. With a last fleeting glimpse I thought I saw the black idol raise its strange arms in the darkness. I shivered.

'Come, Ryna! They are upon us! We must make for the ships!'

'Barragath, you have keen eyes and a steady hand! You are indeed a greater archer than I!' I shouted.

He laughed grimly, and we ran for our lives down the broad passage with the tumultuous noise growing behind them, and before us the sounds of battle.

Through a great arch at the head of a long, narrow courtyard we could see our companions fighting what looked to be a hopeless battle. Evening had fallen—we had

been wandering in the maze of that place for a whole day. Hundreds of Reaver warriors, fully armed with spiked shields and jagged swords, had surrounded Colomain and Risaeon and the soldiers with Yarin on the steps. Even as we emerged into the half-light, Colomain was falling back towards the arch, his blade sweeping in arcs of light through the oncoming foe. With a chilled heart I saw that the Reavers had lain in hiding all along, waiting for us.

Suddenly, all eyes fell upon us —Colomain looked up and saw Barragath and myself standing at the head of the stairs, and all the enemy looked upon us too —and there was a strange silence. For I seemed not to them as I had seemed before: a pale light shone around me, and it was as though I had somehow grown taller and more beautiful. I felt a burning within me. I looked round at the crowd, their swords oddly limp in their hands. It was as though they waited for a goddess to speak —and suddenly I opened my hand and realised that the Jewel had gone. Without noticing it, as I had run along at Barragath's side, I had placed it on my brow, and it had stayed there, unheld, shining. Even here, at the end of life, I cannot say when the moment was that I put it there, yet there it was —and its power rippled around that place like an ocean wave.

Behind me, in the darkness under the arch, there was a great crash, and a cloud of dark dust swept out around me as the Chamber of Gon-runin collapsed within. The noise, like thunder, died away, the dust settled, and all the warriors waited still, in the same anxious silence. I knew then that I held them in my power.

I raised my hands, putting aside my sword. Great and

deep silence fell over all.

'Stand back, ye servants of darkness!' I cried in the tongue of the poets. 'Let the wielder of the Jewel Sterreth and her followers pass!'

And the Reavers fell back at once, some fleeing into the shadows. The Taran host gathered itself, and the members of the Company that were there came together. I kept my hands raised high. White light now shone strongly all about me; it was as though a goddess indeed had descended among them. Some averted their eyes, some made to bow, others trembled.

'Fear not, warriors of Tara!' I said. 'For thy faith and loyalty has been rewarded! Light has come forth from the darkness, and thy realm shall be free from the evil of the night. Let us leave this place!'

And so saying, we left the Citadel —and as we entered each part of that place, fighting ceased at once, the enemy fled, and wonder and awe washed around them all with the strange light that glowed about me. I did not turn from my path to explore that place, nor did we seek any further treasures, nor the lives of the enemy, nor his secrets: I walked out before the gates of the fortress and all my host came with me.

There I summoned the King of the Reavers —and he came, bending down before me and averting his eyes from the light. And I made him swear a great oath, that, whatsoever he had sworn to others should be void before the words he now uttered in the light of the Jewel: that he should never again walk uninvited on Taran soil. And he swore, and his lords swore, and the Taran host cheered.

I left Wormstone then —left it with all its defences, all its secrets, all its unexplored armouries, its great caverns, its wealth of gems, its might, all of these things intact and virtually untouched. I never saw the Firevault, nor looked in the face of the Dragonlord whom they say rules the Morndred, his servants, from that dark pit. I had what I had come for. Never in all the annals of Gandria has there been so foolish a mortal, so blind a queen, so proud a woman and so fierce an ambition: to walk into the heart of darkness and leave it unlit, to tread the passages of doom and leave them roofed and whole, to meet the gods of evil and not deny them. This was the Curse of the Jewel, that I was so blinded to things real beneath the sun —or so I said to myself later. I wonder now, with the wisdom that time has brought, whether the Curse was a real thing, or merely an excuse, a phantom power, a thing made up to justify the folly that all mortals are guilty of each day in facing the truth of things and refusing to act upon it, or even to see it.

I came down that black hill, then, like a star, and they bowed before me, their faces reflecting my own light with awe. I had become a goddess —and yet I walked among them. Even the haughtiest lords of Tara were subdued when they saw Sterreth burning on my brow.

We sailed out of despair into hope, out of that shadowed harbour into the high seas, and a swift wind blew from the east, catching our sails. Storms came with the dawn — lightning flickered over the receding towers of the Citadel, and I heard men mutter that the Dark Gods were angry with their servants for allowing their treasure to be stolen and their secret places to be defiled. Soon, though, we were far

from Wormstone, and the cold winds swept us on toward home.

They say they saw me coming like a herald to the sun one chill morning—a silver light shone on the horizon and men and women quailed, fearing some vengeance of the Morndred against the foolishness of their lords in following me over the sea. But as the ships drew nearer, men saw that they bore the banners of Tara, not the enemy, and a huge crowd gathered on the quays. At first, some made to cheer as the first ships pulled in, but all sound died as they watched the leading vessel, with me standing high in the bows, come slowly to the quay—for it was laden with a ghostly light, a living moonlight, which bathed my slender form and spilled over onto the waves of the harbour. A great hush descended on all of them, and many sank to their knees.

I disembarked, but said no word—in silence I greeted those lords who had remained, Anyae and Ulforth among them, and they bowed to me, and I looked on them with kindness and grace, and I gazed at the crowds, and they silently followed me and the procession of the nobles of Tara and the Crimson Company that had remained with me, up the winding road to the High Houses. They say also that no bird sang that morning and that even the beasts watched me as I walked up that hill. I do not know, for I was in another world, a world where light and dark are different, and the voices of things other than men reach the mortal ear.

I made for myself a great realm, and for the most part it was free from evil: I rode at the head of a host that went to cleanse the Dawn Tower in the Mountains of Morning, that

had come to be called the Tower of Serpents in ages past, of the forces of Shadowed Men that had taken refuge there when Baladac had retreated. There was little need for bloodshed to drive them out: the silver light that bathed me remained with me for a long while, and I had but to reveal myself to them to have them flee, or rend themselves, or cower away. It must have seemed to them that the power of their dark god had indeed deserted them, for here it shone on the brow of one in whose likeness they perhaps saw the face of their ancient enemy.

I held great councils with the lords of the land, but hardly needed to speak—for at that time the Star Chamber of Tara was filled not with the light of stars above but with the pale glow of Sterreth, and they were awed by it, and much that had fallen into disorder in the realm was repaired without strife or quarrel, and all of them did me homage. I was not made Queen, for the Throne was kept empty in reverence to the High King's memory, but at my own bidding I was addressed as Mistress of Tara, and took over its wardenship from Anyae, the Earl Marshal.

The harvest of that year was the greatest in memory, and those who had been starved in the dominion of Baladac now had bounty, and the poor were fed, and the children danced, and the summer nights seemed longer and warmer, and the winter that came was mild.

No sight nor sign of the Reavers did that realm see for many a year: no enemy dared set foot within Tara's borders, and it was as though an enchanted fence had been built, invisible, but stronger than steel, about the kingdom. The bandits, criminals and rebels who had troubled the land in

Baladac's day and before now fled into the mountains or southward to Turgal, and the people had a peace greater than any they had known.

Galatar had not waited for me—he had not stood at the gates of the High Houses with Cundria when I returned from the sea. I guessed that his heart had been divided, and that he had wondered and perhaps been anxious about my fate in the Dark Isles—but he did not return, though I waited for him, and wished that I saw him with Barragath and Colomain and the others of the Company, talking amongst themselves—but after a while I heard of war and rebellion in Turgal, and the battles between the brothers for the throne they called the Seat of the Sun in Thorondimar-Maslak, and I waited for him no more, the father I had dreamed of.

What of the others of the Crimson Company? It seemed to me that alone in Tara, the members of the Company were aloof from me: whereas all others bowed in awe, or swore allegiance, gazing in amazement and great wonder at the Jewel on my brow, the Crimson Company looked at me differently. Though there was no disloyalty in their eyes, no hatred nor jealousy nor anything dark, I could not feel easy with them about me. They saw too much, I felt; perhaps they knew me too well. When Galatar and Cundria did not come before me, then, part of me was relieved rather than sad; and when Ulforth said that he would return to Restonia, and Risaeon with him—while Colomain and Barragath journeyed to find the other companions, Wirrithal and Drenca, who had fallen by the wayside—I felt as though a burden had lifted from me: I no longer had to think of Wenfold or the Eye of Deldellu or its dream. The unwalked

road could stay unwalked. After a short while I was left alone, and the Company was no more. I did not think much on it, filling my mind with other things.

How can I describe my life in the centre of that light from the Jewel? How can words capture the reality of being a goddess? It was like seeing light from the other side — somehow I had no need of mortal eyes or ears to see or hear. Somehow the thoughts of men whispered across the chambers where I walked, though none had spoken; sometimes I would see things that others seemed not to see. Whereas for most mortals life is for the most part visionless, and visions, like dreams, touch us from some great distance and move us only rarely, for me at that time I lived in a vision, and the daily needs of life around me were the things that failed to touch or reach me. I hardly slept: sleep was like the briefest draught of wine with a meal, warming my soul and easing me, but was not the food itself — being awake and aware, that was the food. All the world seemed made of living colours, as though the gods painted it fresh each moment for my eyes alone.

It gave me power, that Jewel. Some say it gave me power over men's minds, and that I used it to guide their wills to my own ends, but it was not so. The mortal mind is built on beauty — its foundations are buried beneath much that is ruinous and dark, but they are strong still. Say rather, then, that the light of the Jewel shone through to the foundations of others' souls, and that, being then able to see into their deepest hearts, I could speak to the true man or woman there, unlike any other. They followed me then, as what mortal could resist listening to the only voice that could

speak to their innermost ear? The Jewel, coming from the deeps of the world before time began, possessed the power that Raendu had granted to that part of his Dream, and that echoed under the lighter souls of mortals.

It was not so with all of them, though. As I have said, it seemed to me that the Crimson Company remained apart — and when a man denied himself to me I could not so easily pierce the clouds of his mind, and his foundations remained invisible. But for the most part, the people of Tara flocked to me, and I saw them all, dealing out the justice that is the prerogative of monarchs, and they adored me.

If the lords of Tara disagreed with me in anything, it was in one matter only.

I had been returned from the Dark Isles for some time, and had established my power in the realm, and the harvests were gathered and the summer waning when news came to the High Houses that Baladac had returned to the West. He had passed with a great host, so the scouts said, through the southern pass into the lands west of the Mountains of Morning, and rumour came from there saying that war, which had halted briefly during his withdrawal from Tara, had been renewed. For a great many armies had remained in the west when Baladac had fled, and they awaited him, still holding the Middle Lands in thrall and Shand besieged; and he had driven out Galatar and Cundria and their armies, and held tight to the throne he had usurped. Then Anyae and Yarin and the others came to me and begged to be allowed to gather the arms of Tara and ride out to the aid of Tara's friends, and so sweep Baladac back into his own realm, thus aiding Galatar's quest also.

But a strange reluctance seized me at this. I had of course been aware that Shand still suffered, and that the Middle Lands groaned for release, and even that Galatar struggled in mighty Turgal to the south, but these things seemed far away, as though Tara had been removed from them like a boat from its moorings in the harbour, and had now anchored out to sea and become an island. The concerns of other lands seemed to be no concern of mine. The lords protested, saying that these lands were our allies, and that many bonds of blood and friendship existed between them and Tara—we owed them our help, it was said.

Nevertheless I denied them—and I went further than that, closing the borders of Tara to all comers, and forbidding any to ride beyond them without my permission. At this there were many mutterings—I felt them ripple like a wave of shadow through the light of the Jewel—but my power remained firm, and some said that the Mistress acted wisely, seeking to preserve the freedom of the realm and to conserve its strength, its food and its arms against any return of evil. But Anyae frowned, and Yarin grew hot, and the councils were for a short time uneasy. Yet, as time went on, and as the news from outside grew less, and as travellers between Tara and the outside world were now few, this uneasiness passed to a degree, and the realm flourished.

Was this not all indeed good? Was I not wise, as they said? Songs were then made and sung in the halls of the lords of Tara and in the High Houses of the realm of Ryna, Mistress of Tara, and the power of the White Jewel that she had brought forth from the darkness; wine flowed, and the

children of those years seemed fair, and the harvests were good. What did it matter that the world beyond the mountains suffered, or that mighty armies were seen to journey regularly from the Dark Isles through the Pass of the South to make war on Shand? What did it matter that rumour told of greater strife in Turgal, and that Galatar needed help more than ever as he strove to free his land from the dominion of his usurping brother? What did it matter that the sunsets seemed full of blood? The dawns were bright, and the hills green, and these things were like a story, something that tales spoke of, not part of the living world. Tara was beautiful, Tara was free: the power of its Mistress would keep it so.

So even I believed. When a mortal lives beyond the light of the ordinary day, bathed in a continual moonlight and surrounded by awestruck servants into whose very minds she can peer, life can seem very different: to me, all my life had been but a foreshadowing of this, and my mysterious origins in the Wood of Seven, my vision at the Eye of Deldellu, and all else that had happened to me, were the prelude to the song in which I now lived and breathed. Like the tuning of a musical instrument, that discord had been a needed preparation for the harmony that was to follow. The realm therefore prospered within itself to the degree that I blinded myself to the truth, and the music of that harmony was shallow.

There came a time when some in Tara approached me — merchants and traders for the most part— saying that they had lost wealth through my edicts forbidding trade with other lands. They begged that I might reconsider, and allow

them to send envoys over the mountains to seek out news and establish lines of commerce—but I pondered long on this, and it seemed that I was struck by a sudden wisdom. I called them to me, and told them of my plan to trade with the Reavers of the Dark Isles. Part of the gnawing discontent of the Reavers, I reasoned, was that they had always been denied the riches that Tara could offer. Why not then provide these through trade? The chances of any Reaver King then being tempted to break his oath would be less, while Taran merchants would profit.

While some readily agreed, some discontent went abroad at this idea: trading with the ancient enemy was tantamount to sanctioning that enemy's past and current deeds they said. It was like inviting them back into the realm, against the very oath I had made them swear, and which so far they had kept. I challenged these opponents to my will, replying that the oath would stand: no Reaver would set foot on Taran soil—Taran merchants would journey across the sea to them, bringing back wealth and goods in return. The argument went on, always subdued by the undeniable light at my brow. In the end, my will prevailed, and trading ships sailed to the Dark Isles and came back with gold and silver and many other goods, and Taran wealth grew further still. Since we had closed our ears to the cries of the world, it seemed to many Tarans that this did no harm and brought only good—we had forgotten much, though we said instead that we had forgiven.

Ten years went by in this way—I came to full womanhood, and the people said I had great beauty, and I accepted their words. I had taken to looking regularly into

the Twisted Mirror, for it seemed still and calm: no dark shapes swirled in the glass, and the image it reflected now seemed true to me. I stood before it, tall, proud, with pale hair and deep blue eyes, and I wondered then at my ancestry, that had brought Valadria's beauty down the ages to me. Would that I had wondered a little further! But the face that looked back at me then seemed the instrument of the gods themselves, and I pondered it no further.

Barragath, alone of the Company, returned to Tara bringing news of wars and strife, and I allowed him in. He became a smith again, as he had promised his father, under the walls of the High Houses, and we watched each other, looking for something in each others' eyes. He spoke little, and I knew that he thought much that he would never speak.

At that time I wed Hrimae, one of the noblest of the lords of Tara, and friend of Yarin's. He had sailed with me to the Dark Isles, and had been there when I descended from the hill—but when he spoke to me he said that he loved me before then, when he had first seen me on the battlements of the High Houses. I loved him for that, and for his steadiness, and his own beauty. Some things it is hard to write in a tale, even a tale that tells one's own life: indeed Hrimae lives in my mind still, though he did not return to me before I left Tara for the last time. But that is still in the future of my story. It is so hard to keep his picture quiet in my mind! He longs to leap out at me from this page, wrecking my words, but I must contain him, and hold him to the pattern of deeds that were yet to be done.

By him I had my two children: the Children of the Jewel, some called them, but I would not so call them now: children

come from a deep place within, beyond the reach of any Jewel. First came Syra, my daughter, fire-haired and deep-eyed; then came Arime, my son, who was just a babe when I left him. Sweeter than any earthly wine were they to me, and for their sakes' alone would I have made the journey that has led me at the end to this place, but at that time it seemed to me that all my deepest dreams had come true.

Fifteen years thus passed since I had brought Sterreth out of the shadows: Syra was five years old, Arime had had his first birthday. All the summers had proven rich; gold flowed in the hands of the dwellers in Alathosa and the other cities of Tara, and to any traveller from a distant realm it would have perhaps seemed that here was contentment itself.

And yet it was not so. I did not seem to change: but while I retained the look of youth, blossoming in beauty on the outside, I had grown in aloofness within. Such was the sway that I held over all those people that I had become accustomed to my word instantly becoming unquestioned law; such was my ferocity in being thwarted, even in some minor matter, that after some years many folk ceased to seek out my counsel or judgement in matters of strife between themselves. Slowly, so slowly that no one had perceived it, my heart had grown colder and colder.

Sometimes, as I looked into the Mirror, I saw the Jewel on my brow and I wondered at it. It was shaped like a seed, smaller than a fingernail, but it burned like a coal. It did not pain me, and no heat came from it, but the light waxed and waned of its own accord, as though fanned by some unknown wind and dulled by an unseen cloud. Often it

would glow brightly all night as I lay abed; at other times it would be as dim as a candle's flame. No mood of mine seemed to influence it. When I was filled with passion, it would sometimes seem dispassionate; when I fell quiet, it would occasionally glow like an ember of the sun. It was as though it followed the dictates of some other will: shaped like a seed as it was, I began to wonder what was growing from it.

But adoration turned, men and women alike, slower than the seasons of the world, into awe, and the awe into fear, and then, even slower than that, the fear became hatred.

What was it that they began to hate? Were they not comfortable enough, and well-fed, and guarded? Were they not flourishing as a people unlike any in Gandria? But perhaps that was it —no realm could stand alone in glory, just as no mortal can be completely prised from another and stand content. As the world suffered, they denied it, but in denying it, they denied themselves —and then, gradually seeing what they had become, they began to hate themselves. In my beauty, unchanging and inhuman, they began to suspect sorcery; in my manner they perceived darkness; in my eyes they saw things that they had thought were banished from Tara forever: lust, greed, pride. They began to see that they were becoming like the enemy they had opposed for so long. They had not beaten him after all —he had beaten them. And the seed of their glory was becoming the seed of their despair.

My mind came to ponder the deeds of those earlier years in a new and dreadful way. What did the loss of the red-robed priest I had killed, or the dark chamber that had fallen,

or even the black idol itself mean to the Dark Circle when they had my soul? Like the sun rising out of the ocean, I began to see what I had done, and to appreciate the depths of their trap—but unlike the rising sun, I could not escape the waters in which I had drowned myself. I was truly trapped, a prisoner of the Jewel.

For I had long ago discovered that it could not be removed.

It sat there, above and between my mortal eyes, light and shining. I saw the light of it in my daughter's eyes, and felt that she began to look more at it than at me. Syra was like me in many ways, I thought, and unlike in others—she had a mother in me, to begin with, a mother who, I hoped, showed her the love that I had never been shown myself. But there was a wall of ice between us, and I could not reach her. There was something dark in her soul as there had been in mine. I found her once, out on the high, unwallled battlements of the High Houses, leaning out dangerously into the wind, and I scolded her, but she was not afraid of me, and she laughed, and she said to me that she would welcome death if it came to her in such a way, flying into the wind. That chilled me, and I went to speak with her, but she turned from me and ran inside. I wondered then how life and death seemed to a child whose mother was like a goddess.

The Jewel did not shine in Arime's eyes—he had a light of his own. His hair was dark, and his spirit was quieter than his sister's. I tried to show him love, but in some ways I wondered if he needed it. Though he was very young, and had scarce begun to look at the world before I left him, I sensed an inner calm in him which I envied. A mother can

envy her own child —just as my children came from that deep place where Jewels cannot reach, so the power of the Jewel had not touched him, and I began to see that that was what I envied: the untouched, the unfired, the unsullied, that I saw in him. Looking in his innocent eyes I wept, and Sterreth began to feel heavy and piercing on my brow for the first time.

It was not long from this point that I came to my decision. Unrest had spread in Tara in the year: Reaver armies, passing by the southern borders, had found and slain a Taran hunting party, and rumour spread of how ill-used their captives had been before they had been killed contemptuously. It was as though a spark had fallen into dry hay —the kingdom divided into the supporters of trade with the Dark Isles and those who still brooded on the shame of our broken alliances with the lands of the west and fretted over what Tara had become. Then word came that our merchant ships were harried, and that the Reavers were once more turning to piracy without regard for their oaths, and using the name of the Mistress of Tara in scorn. That spring, envoys came through hardship from Shand, saying that the Four Kingdoms beseeched aid from Tara in war, being outnumbered and heavily besieged by the enemy —but I rejected them, saying that Tara had its own concerns. The people, hearing this, began to put their fears and hatreds into words, and I heard for the first time the name ‘Witch’ among them, and they did not cheer as I went by, and some even dared to scowl. In my pride I dismissed this, but at night, alone, I trembled and wept, and I began to claw at the Jewel, but it would not come off, and glowed with a light that

began to have even less to do with me.

Then, at last, as the summer just gone waned into autumn, Hrimae came to me and said that he would sail to the Dark Isles and wreak vengeance on the Reavers, and he gathered a mighty host of Taran warriors, and I could not deny him.

I should say, rather, that I would not: whereas at first the Jewel's power had dwarfed any other, seeming to be the light of my own will, I now began to see that it had not been so, and that my own will had been swamped in its shimmering radiance, as the stars are swallowed by the light of a blazing sun. Now, when Hrimae spoke to me, I began to discover that I still had a voice —it was not yet strong enough to speak, but it was there. I did not deny him. He took my silence as consent, sensing the struggle in my soul, and he took his leave of me.

I watched him sail from the harbour below the walls of the High Houses, the harbour I had first looked down upon as a prisoner long before, and again tears rose in me, the first tears of forsaken love that I had felt since Galatar had spoken to me before I sailed to find the Jewel. Galatar had been right: the way of Sterreth had come to evil. But who would now show me the unwalked, brighter road? I was condemned, and so was the hollow kingdom that I had made. The one man that I had loved I could not restrain from his quest, and I watched him sail away into the dawn.

I was left alone with the Jewel.

THE POOL OF KAELA

*Sterreth's fire cool waters keep
Far from Tara's mountain steep,
Down Tarrabelner's mighty stream,
Blending sunlight and moonbeam,
In the Great Sea take thy sleep,
To the World's End drifting deep.*

-from The Book of Seven

So we come to the last part of my tale, and to the autumn of this year. Hrimae had sailed weeks before, but I had had no word nor sign of his return. The power of the Jewel could not help my mortal eyes find him beyond the edge of the world, but I came often to the high stone keep of Tara's topmost tower: there, in the Star Chamber, its crystal skylight throwing dark and moving shadows onto the marble floor with the passage of clouds across the evening sky, I, Ryna, Mistress of Tara, surveyed the coast to the east, miles away.

I was still accounted young and beautiful, even by those who called me 'Witch': I looked at my face in the faint reflection in the glass of the window: my rich, white hair — its fire had turned to ice— and trailing, snowy gown gave me, they said, a spectral beauty; pale eyes, too pale to be called blue, looked out from my smooth-skinned face. Too young I looked, in fact, for I then felt old indeed, in body and spirit, but appeared only a score of years by the glass — my face showed no wrinkle, my hand no looseness, my eye no

weakness or infirmity: like a crystal was I, some said an icicle, unmoving, unaging, melting not with the passage of times or circumstances which decayed the mighty around me. And yet that reflection was so thin, so transparent, as I peered through it to the sky beyond.

Ice was my image —I was frozen in time, frozen in motion, frozen in love. Had I permitted any to draw near to me I would have melted, I felt, and so I stood aloof from them all —and yet they came. I was too cold to care, it seemed —but perhaps it is only the dispossessed who truly care, for they feel their caring as an eternal anguish, a pain so great that were they to reveal the least part of it to the world, they would shatter. So, beneath the crystal beauty that others saw, burned the hellish flames of my soul. I see this now more clearly —at that time, I would not dare to look so close. I had let Hrimae closer than any —no other would draw so near, I thought.

I peered out at the clouds as they gathered force and rushed westward in from the sea, soon to break on the spurs of the mountains where the towers would ring with thunder and rain would sing in the stone. Lightning flashed in the faceted jewel at my brow, thunder swelled against the high wall, but my eyes looked beyond the storm: they were fixed on the horizon far away, where, lost amid the violence of the sky and the growing dimness of the evening I could imagine, if not actually perceive, the Dark Isles whence betrayal and death reached out to me. Hrimae had taken six thousand swords of Tara to assail the Dark Isles by force —a hopeless quest, but one which somehow needed to happen. The rage and guilt of the people had found its voice, and had grown

stronger than I.

The white wolf at my feet stirred and growled. Valgor, I called him, Wolf of the Snows —they had told me that Valadria had had such a beast, and it had seemed fitting that I, wearing her face, should imitate her so. I looked away from the window.

The door swept open and the Lord Anyae, Earl Marshal of Tara, entered, bowing to the floor, his clothes wet. I indicated the hearth where a great fire burned, and he rose and walked wearily over to it.

His old, rough eyes turned towards me and he tried to speak but failed. Then, his face contorting momentarily, he said, heavily and slowly, 'He has not returned.'

I was gazing into the fire. The white wolf settled at my feet again. The man went on quickly, as though the fire had thawed his voice.

'They are coming now. In their thousands, up the road from the sea. They are shouting "The Reavers have come! And all our best swords taken, taken, over the Sea!" They have grown mad. I cannot command my soldiers against their own people. Something must be said, or done.'

'He has not returned...' I repeated softly.

The man stifled his words and stared into the shadows by the hearth.

I came forward quietly and took his hand, and though he had been out in the winter wind, my hand was colder than his own.

'I must go, Liegeman Anyae. Do not be afraid,' I said to him.

'I do not fear for myself...' he began.

‘Then do not be afraid for me! This is my heritage. I felt them drawing close, Anyae, as I have felt the dark voice growing louder. The time has come for me to denounce the evil of this thing that once I sought so desperately, as I should have denounced it what seems an age ago when I first saw it. Do you think I have not seen the shadow of evil grow in my own daughter’s eyes? The time has come, Anyae. This is mine to do.’

Though my voice was gentle, it rang in the high vault of the Star Chamber, centre of power in Tara, where the swirling night sky could be seen through the clear, crystal roof, the stars now hidden in clouds of storm. I placed my hand on his cloaked shoulder, still damp with wind-blown rain.

‘Your courage is also your heritage, Mistress,’ he muttered. He did not know the truth he spoke —I needed all my courage in what was to follow.

I will not hinder the end now, feeling the call of death even as I write. I wasted no time. I took my leave of all, leaving little Arime in his cradle asleep. He perhaps would not even recall my face, I thought, as I kissed him —yet it was for him that I had to do this thing. Would he ever understand that? Or would he first need to tread his own road into darkness before he came to see why sometimes leaving those we love is an act of love? Syra I saw also —she tossed in some dream in her bed, and I knew then that I would never reach her: perhaps no one would.

Lightning flashed on the grey battlements as Anyae led the white mare Garean to the western gate. Curtains of grey rain were falling, chilling the air. I embraced him under the

wall. The heavy portcullis was lifted into darkness. I mounted and reached down to take Anyae's hand.

'If things become too hard —if Hrimae does not return— you are the Regent of my people, till Syra is of age. I would, though, name Arime over his sister, if the people will have any whom I name, and if my naming has not become a curse. I am no longer the Mistress of Tara, perhaps not even of myself. Try to obey your heart, Anyae, as I now do, if the shadow there will let you. For I believe now that Raendu lays paths before us and we must find the courage to walk them to the end —I have wandered far from mine, but I seek it now, whatever the shadows in my heart say,' I said, and rode out into the rain and thunder, taking the westward road over the mountain pass.

Somewhere behind a door, as I disappeared into the storm, Valgor the white wolf howled above the thunder.

As the sun clambered free of the mountain mists into the open sky, I woke in the wet grass by the side of a deep lake and peered down into its depths, dim in the light of dawn. I saw my own face as the light grew: my pale skin, my white hair —and there in the centre of my brow, unheld by any clasp or circlet, the White Jewel, Sterreth. I felt it there, its weight and shape and power, the enchanted jewel with which I had forged a realm. But now at least, rather than its prisoner, it was mine, and it had to ride with me.

The bleak hills to the east shone in the sunlight; here and there the red leaves of the trees and the pale grass swayed in the late autumn of the western slopes of the mountains through which I had come. I had ridden for many days, from

the great Pass of the South, following the swift streams down the hillsides as they merged and joined in the web of small valleys, making their way down to Tarrabelner, the mighty western river which flowed on through the countless lands of the plain to be lost at last in legend and the Great Sea on the Western Edge of things. As the streams had bent to the south, I had tended north and west, avoiding any trace of the enemies I knew prowled this part of the world, leaving my own realm for the last time. To where did I ride? I had thought at first to seek out Wenfold, where I should have gone long before—but it was not to be. One place only loomed large in my mind: I rode to Kirratamon, the Haunted Forest, the Wood of Seven, where I had been born, and where the sadness that was my life had begun.

I left the lake and rode on, coming to the high ridge crowned by the outlying trees of the Wood. During all that ride I met no living person, and encountered nothing but the wind and changing weather, the running water and the beasts and birds, and the autumn sun shining—for all the lands around the Haunted Wood were empty. The vast hosts of the enemy were busy with Shand to the north, and the Middle Lands to the West—neither Reavers nor Shadowed Men walked near the Wood of Seven.

The trees on the ridge waited for me. They were higher than any I had ever seen in Tara, towering in height and presence, mightier than I. Garean the horse flinched when a small breeze stirred the leaves, but I urged the mare forward, out of the sunlight and into the silent green and golden shadows.

I rode for some time without hearing or seeing any living

thing, save the trees. While the sun shone it seemed that my path was clear, though the westward road had long since vanished into the grass. I was thankful at first to be protected by the trees from the plain's cold wind, and the sharp rains which had chilled me were now hardly to be felt on the forest floor. High overhead the golden autumn canopy whispered; below all was silent and still but for the single horse, riding.

But the silence quickly became oppressive. I could see no game, neither beast nor bird, in the whole wood. Of water there was no lack, but the air grew very still and warm. I found though that broad sunlit clearings opened up here and there where I could feel the sun on my face and see the swift clouds racing—but as the days drew on progress became more difficult. The wood grew thicker and more tangled, and it began to rain steadily; a thin, despondent rain which found a way through the canopy and made the air swim with a strange clamminess. Though winter was approaching, it was unnaturally warm and stifling.

Nights were very dark. I gave up lighting a fire—the flames disturbed the darkness with their flickering light and noise. I did without, living on my dwindling supplies of dried fruits and meats. The fires, when I had lit them, had had another effect too—they had made me feel very much alone, far from home, lost in the wilderness. No living man or woman knew where I was. At least in the darkness I could forget my surroundings and imagine myself elsewhere. Sometimes, sleeping huddled beneath the roots of trees, only the quiet beating of my heart and the louder breathing of Garean reminded me that I was still alive.

As the forest drew on it became increasingly dark, until

even in the middle of the day only a shadowy twilight pervaded through the world of the trees—they seemed to crowd around me. Waking up in the morning became more and more difficult; all through the day I became drowsier.

Several days after entering the wood I was riding down a shallow valley when something happened. I had begun to despair of finding that which I sought, for, if truth be told, I had no clear idea what that was, and every part of my soul hungered to see meaning everywhere in that forest. But, though I was in turmoil, I could hardly stay on the horse for unnatural sleepiness, when Garean stirred.

Something was moving in the wood.

I tried to shake myself awake. A great and noisy motion as of wind swept through the trees. A large shape, a Shadowed Man, but old and hideous, as though he had lived like a beast in the wild for years, plunged out of nowhere before me and stood in my path. I cried out. Garean reared, and I fell to the ground. But when I stood, I could not see the creature—it had looked familiar, like a face out of some forgotten nightmare. Garean bolted in fear. I scrambled to my feet and cried out again, but the horse was gone into the shadows. I was alone.

Choosing a direction I plunged through leaves, my sword in my hand—and found myself in a sunlit clearing.

All was suddenly silent and still. The glade was full of light, a strange, greenish, bright light that I did not understand—my heart was beating fast, and I was now fully alert. Garean was nowhere to be seen, but another horse stood in the middle of the clearing, quietly grazing. Rich trappings decorated with silver ornaments hung from its

harness; the saddle was high and smooth and woven with silver tracery; tiny bells hung from the plaited mane. But what startled me was not the finery: the horse itself was a deep green in colour. It looked up at me with dark, placid eyes and went on grazing. This was no trick of the light —its hide was green.

Nearby a small fire was burning. A dark figure sat with its back to me. The green horse looked up again with its deep eyes. There was no sign of the Shadowed Man.

‘Welcome, daughter,’ the figure said, turning. It was a woman. Her eyes and hair were dark but tinged with green, her face glowed palely in the weird light, and her robes were green upon green, adorned with silver, gleaming. A broad green cape, rich with white fur, swept over all. She was very beautiful. Her face too I felt I had seen somewhere before — but not in any waking light, nor even in any dream that I could recall.

Tiny sparks leapt up from the fire as she stirred it with a long stick.

‘My horse is lost,’ I said, wondering if somehow I had stumbled into another world.

‘Join me,’ the Green Lady said. ‘I ride for Hallowhall.’

I sat down slowly by the fire.

‘I hoped to find the Powers of this wood. I have a deed to do,’ I said. I looked into the green eyes —but it was difficult to think as I had been accustomed to thinking. A sense of wonder overcame me, and an apprehension of joy, as though I were indeed in a dream, or a spell, where something is suspected but never realised —or perhaps all my life, including the Jewel, had been a dream and this was the

waking. Light lived in the air as something tangible. And somehow I felt I had indeed seen this Lady in some other time, perhaps in some other life.

The Lady nodded.

As she did so, I felt myself slipping rapidly and incomprehensibly into sleep, and the crackle of the flames was harsh in the growing night. I remembered nothing more except that partway through the night I woke briefly to see the embers of the dying fire and somewhere beyond them a green shadow, moving.

When dawn came the clearing was empty —empty of living things save the trees, and empty of the light which had filled it before. Ordinary sunlight gleamed on the dew. I wandered into the trees, cold but refreshed, seeking water and hoping to find Garean, but I came upon the green horse instead, drinking at a pool from which the water ran over a shallow bed of stones.

‘Where is your green mistress, I wonder?’ I said aloud, stroking the horse’s mane.

The tiny bells tinkled as the horse looked across the pool. Under the trees on the far side was a hooded shape, moving. The figure turned, and the Lady’s face shone out from under the hood in the sunlight as, with a calm ease and grace, she stepped into the water and sprang lightly across, carrying gathered berries from deeper in the wood in her skirt. We both ate, and drank deeply of the cold water, and washed our faces.

A chill breeze arose, and with it a light shower of rain began to fall into the pool. The Green Lady mounted her

horse and offered her hand, adorned with emeralds, to me, and I swung up behind her, all in silence.

In this fashion I began my journey deep into the secret parts of the Haunted Wood, whence I had come out of mystery, riding for many days, without words, as though caught in some joyous enchantment in which speech was clumsy and unmannered. As we progressed, I became content to ride along unthinking through the bright autumn woods, and the forest itself changed, opening out more often to the sun and now full of birds of all kinds, whereas before it had been silent and empty—and my mind was eased, and whether the dream in which I wandered was my own or the green rider's I could not tell, and I began not to care. I saw no sign of the Shadowed Man who had leapt out at me, nor of any other creature save the beasts and birds of the wood.

During the days the sun shone, or a light rain fell, and we rode on, always westward, under the leaves, and I grew more and more at peace, and forgetful of woe, and time seemed no longer a thing to be raced with or a flame or a stone, but a growing thing, growing in the woods and across the sky, rippling outward from the riding horse, and falling with the water in swift torrents towards Tarrabelner far away—and I felt young again, and free, as I had been when I felled Galatar the Giant of Tarthos, or sailed to the Dark Isles unburdened by any jewel. And that had been a long time ago, it seemed. And though at night my mind began to turn again to fear and questions, and I fingered the white gem at my brow, in the morning, when the sun began to spill the first of its light into the dark glades and life and colour returned to the shadows, my eyes were drawn to the Lady's

horse, with its enigmatic eyes and deep green hide, and to the beautiful Lady herself, silent and gracious, and my fears evaporated like the dew.

As we rode, I thought of what had been called great and what was not so great in my life —the realm of Tara that I had brought back to glory; and the men and women— Alina, Galatar, Cundria, Hrimae— whom I had captivated, whom I had made to love me like a goddess. But had it been so? Had I made them love me? Or was there some other truth to things which I had not yet seen? My life seemed now shallow, empty, its passions fleeting: would I have been loved, I wondered, without the Jewel?

Then I thought of my children: of dark-haired, calm Arime, the son I had had at last; of tall, mysterious Syra, the delicate princess with the closed heart: their faces swam before my eyes as we rode along.

I began to see that my heart had been hollowed out by the Jewel, like the scouring of a hard-rinded fruit, leaving me empty and used, while that same rind, now like a shell, encased me in its tomb. I had not found myself in its white depths. And now I rode on, on into a dream, a hope, perhaps to my death —though while I possessed the Jewel I knew myself to be undying— and I wondered if there were any escape from that tomb. Could I ever return to the road I had not walked? Sterreth felt cold and heavy on my brow.

One night —how many nights since I had entered the forest I could not tell— the Green Lady went about lighting a fire in silence.

All that the green woman did was done with a peace and grace of movement, an air of power at rest, which both eased

my heart and frightened me: I was not used to feeling fear. The Lady knew all woodcraft, so that her sense for the ways of the forest was near magical; she knew the sky in all its moods, and she welcomed the rain and bowed her head to the dawn each morning. I thought often that in the Lady's presence there should have been music— sometimes it seemed that I heard it whispering in the trees when the Lady moved or spoke, but I look back now and wonder if that part was indeed a dream. The sound of her voice was a rare delight—it was hardly ever necessary for her to speak—and I found that I looked forward to our mealtimes together, when speech was more likely, as though then a time was shared more precious than any other. I did not think to question who she was or whence she had come—it was as though I had known her all my life.

The Wood stretched on: no other living folk were seen or heard. The Lady, phantom of the forest, haunted this wild, green, endless hall, unentwining me from all spells, waking me, letting me breathe the fresh, clean air of a freedom I had not felt for an age, freedom to look freely at myself. If my life had begun in this wood, I fell to thinking, where exactly had I been born? And, if there really were meaning in life, what did it all mean?

'Would you care to hear my music?' asked the Green Lady.

We were both sitting before the blazing fire. The Lady held in her lap an exquisite golden harp, adorned with emeralds, shaped like a swan. Its strings shone like strands of pale silver in the firelight.

I nodded.

The Lady paused, her head bowed, the dark hood of her

cloak covering her face. Night had fallen; the fire spat and crackled and licked the trees with a shimmering red light. Slender ringed fingers drew across the silver strings, and a music arose, like an uncurling seedling, blossoming into the silence.

The sound was formless in a dreamlike way —but as I listened I realised that the heavy, shapeless notes were growing, changing, coming together and drifting apart, borne up by the air, developing into something larger, lighter, more complex. As the Lady's hands moved upon the strings I sensed a harmony which had grown from the formless beginning, drifting in and out of itself, weaving time and space together, until the Lady's voice joined it, not with words but with a chanted melody that challenged the harp's growing theme. In a timeless moment I saw that there could not truly be such a thing as formlessness —but as I grasped the thought, it had gone.

A conflict of harmonies developed, a giving and a receiving, loss and gain, defeat and victory entwined inextricably, growing around the theme of shapeless glory beneath. Tears streamed from my eyes with no cause or reason: the pain of my life and its pleasures were there relived; the fire in my soul that I had surrounded by ice was allowed to spill out, and I began to melt as though I had found my theme in the music from the golden harp.

I continued to see the long years, the events, small and great, of my existence, the children growing, and the growing shadow of doubt and dissatisfaction overwhelming my own heart; the building of the wall within me with the power of the Jewel —and all the while it burned, bright and terrible,

on my brow. I felt it now, like a hot iron, or a cold dagger.

Words began to weave into the enchanted melody, growing with the music but not part of it, and I saw Hrimae standing there, whom I had loved, tall and gentle, but with an unsheathed sword in his hand, telling me of his resolve to fight the Reavers from the Dark Isles whom I had summoned closer to Tara. And he left me, sailing into the east with my defenders, to his doom in the Dark Isles, never to return to me. He loved me then, without the Jewel—he loved me from outside my wall. He was not my prisoner, I saw that—he never had been.

And I began to see something else: I had blamed Sterreth for the coldness in my heart, for leading me astray from my road, and I cursed myself for opening up my soul to its light—but the coldness began, I saw, before I had grasped it from its place in the eye of the dark idol. It went back, back through my life, as far as I could see. It went back to the beginning: there had always been something within me that might compel me to wander from the true light, the right road.

At that moment, the White Jewel shone like a star, like the moon, like the sun, enveloping me in its glow, turning red like the firelight which flickered before me, reaching out to re-consume me, sensing, perhaps, that I was escaping from its power. By shining stronger than the truth, it sought to captivate me again. But, though to do so denied me all certainty, I refused it.

The music finished; the light vanished. I was shaking with unspoken feelings, feeling the earth cold and hard beneath me again. The fire had burned low; the Green Lady and her

horse were gone. I was alone again.

League upon league from the lands of living folk, I shivered uncontrollably.

A laugh rang out from some distance away in the darkness. I saw a light flash through the trees and vanish. Putting out the fire, I drew my sword and went forward, steadying myself, remembering the strange Carthog I had briefly seen far-off now in the wood.

I soon came to a glade unlike any I had yet seen in that great forest: the trees were taller and broader than any I knew or had ever dreamed of knowing. They formed a vast circle, curving away into the night. Their branches reached out far above me, seeming to grasp stars in their boughs, and a silent air of slow and mighty majesty filled the shadows around them. There was neither sight nor sound of any moving thing, only the looming presence of the trees.

I stepped forward, into the circle, under the dim, leafy dome of the glade.

‘It is long since blade saw light in Hallowhall,’ a voice said behind me. I jumped aside, sword ready.

A cloaked figure stood before me in the shadowy starlight. I could not quite see his face. Behind him was a company of men and women, tall and still, dressed in woodland gear. Some carried slender staffs of wood. All stared at me in silence with dark eyes.

He had spoken in the ancient High Tongue, the tongue they had used in the Enchanted Kingdoms before Shand.

‘I am Ryna, Mistress of Tara,’ I said in the same tongue. ‘I come in peace.’

‘Then put up thy sword,’ said the man in a clear voice,

and, feeling the authority in him, I let the blade-point drop and then re-sheathed it. 'Thou hast come with the Green Lady —only thus could thou have come so far unseen and without guidance.'

I said nothing, but his dark eyes saw into my mind, I thought.

'These are the Companions of the Wood,' he said, turning to the ones who stood behind him, 'and they share this land with those who are around us, the great trees. Wert thou an intruder in this, their most hallowed of meeting-places, with sword unsheathed, thy life would be forfeit. But they have no rule which is not subject to wisdom; and thou art not an intruder. They remember thee —for thou hast been here before, long ago, though thou will not recall it.'

'Art thou a phantom?' I asked.

The man said nothing, but something about his gentleness and surety swept aside my worst misgivings. I felt certain that, whatever kind of being he was, were he to journey from the forest to the lands outside he would be called a king among men, perhaps more than king. Suddenly I knelt before him and drew my sword again, offering him the hilt.

'I seek the Great Powers of the Haunted Wood, in the name of Raendu. I am at thy mercy,' I said.

But the shadowy figure, stepping forward into the faint pool of starlight, turned back the sword.

'Rise,' he said, 'there is no kneeling here. We are all humbled beneath the trees. Take back thy sword, in Raendu's name.'

I looked up into his eyes, and at first seemed to see through him to the stars which glittered above. Then the

illusion faded —he was a man, with a beard, flecked with gold, grim and tall, with a black patch over his left eye, but with a bright light in his right. He seemed as old and as young as the trees around him.

As I stood, the others of that company dispersed into the darkness so quietly that I could well have believed that they were images painted on the air, blown away by a night breeze. In a moment I was alone with him in that mighty glade.

‘I know thy tale,’ he said, ‘and I come seeking thee. For thou art upon the edge of the light and the shadow, as I think thou knowest. I have waited for thee, knowing that thou wouldst come here in time. I have many names. I knew thy mother and thy father. I am the Herald of Raendu.’

He did not speak for some time then, as I felt the rush of my life and of life itself wash over me. I wondered if I had died. He stared into the distance as though listening.

‘I will take thee to the Pool of Kaela,’ he said at last, turning back to me. ‘It is true: there are Powers in this wood, beyond the ken of those in the lands outside. Even I do not know all their natures, nor whether they will help thee —but I shall say this,’ and he paused, and compelling me to look at him, he took my hand. I had still half-expected him to be a phantom, without form, but his hand was firm. ‘Know thou, Ryna of Tara, that thou wert not always of that realm: for Tara is not thy home, nor Restonia whence thou came there: for thou wert born here, in the Wood of Seven, and were reared as a babe by these folk who dwell beneath the trees. This much thou mayest know already. But thou mayest not know this: thy father was the Lord Lisaeon of Miria, and thy

mother was Alagar of Valadria. They met their deaths here in the forest, far from help. Lisaeon was of the royal house of his home; but Alagar was the daughter of Ravena, who was descended from the heirs of Valkurn. And their issue was to be the Heir to that High Throne which has stood empty now for many lives of mortals. At first I thought thee dead —then I deemed thee safe. I hope thou wilt forgive me.'

I did not answer. The weariness that I had felt all my life without knowing it suddenly swept aside like a curtain in a mighty wind. Here was the truth. I looked at him intently — here were the answers to the mysteries which had pursued me; here were those who had delivered me to Visaeon long ago, who had reared me from the unknown, and that unknown was now known. The deeper life, that which had been there all along, was taking shape around me. It was as though I had stepped into a story or a play: all along I had been heir to the High Throne. The words of the Companion of the Wood to Visaeon long before returned to me now. But why was I not told of this? Had I wasted my life?

Out of the shadows one of the Companions came forward, leading two horses. One of them was Garean. The pale mare whinnied in greeting.

'She was found far from here,' the Herald said, 'riderless and a very long way from the lands of other men. Thou hadst vanished until thou stepped out from the Lady's spell in the heart of this land. Often the dawn reveals what night holds hidden.'

He mounted the other horse, a tan stallion, unsaddled and unbridled. I lifted myself lightly into my own saddle. The horse's high spirits on finding me again were not to be

matched by my own feelings —the world which had formerly seemed to hold me still and at its mercy was now full of motion, open and blowing, and I felt in need of comfort and shelter. I was still shaking badly. Beneath the trembling I could feel nothing but a growing space in my heart. Whether it would be filled with joy or not, I knew not.

We rode at once out of the huge glade with its living towers and into the forest night.

‘How far is it to the Pool?’ I asked at last.

‘Not far,’ replied my companion.

We rode on through a great leaf-filled darkness which swayed with a wild night breeze, its vast weight of gold and green swimming in a growing mystery, and I felt like a leaf on one of the trees around me, caught and tossed in a fierce wind. The forest held a power different to that of the Jewel: it was a growing thing, a large thing; it had little to do with the minds of men or women, and no mind of man or woman could conceive it —it was larger than my dreams. Here I was no longer mistress of anything. And yet I was the Heir to the High Throne, and I always had been and had never known it. How could such a truth remain hidden for so long? I thought.

‘How much further?’ I asked.

‘A short way,’ the Herald replied.

We rode down into a steep valley, and the way became more difficult, overgrown and littered with large stones, until we could ride no further. Leaving the horses, we continued on foot, and soon came to a high wall of thorns which looked almost man-made. The one-eyed Herald searched along the barrier for a way in, and with some difficulty we both

pushed through into a small sheltered area at the bottom of the valley.

It was even darker here, and cold. The tracery of leaf and branch hung with fragile beads of silver which drenched me as I made my way further down. There was the sound of running water somewhere ahead. He led me a little to the right, heading for the source of the stream. Abruptly, he stopped, signalling that I was to go on alone.

‘But go with the blessing of Raendu,’ he whispered, ‘and find him and thyself. For thou art more than any jewel.’

A power verging on fear gripped me, the like of which I had not felt for years, perhaps never before. The shifting shadows of the wood grew alarming, each leaf defined, each branch fine and black in the night. Was it possible to separate the Jewel from myself? Who was I? I was bound to it, I had thought, and it was bound to me —no power in all Gandria could remove from me that which I clutched so passionately to myself. I was the Jewel, and the Jewel was me. I had no being without it —that was why I had needed it. How could the dreamer be parted from the dream? And yet I was more, the Herald had said.

There was a space between the trees and the stream. To my right silver water fell over three great steps of uncarven rock into a deep, wide pool, its voice filling the air. There were no adornments around the Pool of Kaela, nothing to mark it as a special place —just the starlight, and the tall trees, and the water falling endlessly.

I stood, uncertain, for some time, listening to the voice of the falls, but it said nothing I could understand.

I stepped forward.

The night was cold. The water streamed endlessly into the pool. I laid aside my sword and belt and other gear, and knelt by the waterside, alone, naked, the Jewel at my brow.

I had never felt so strange. I had thought my own heart empty —I had known no gods, I thought: only the power which I had made serve me, but which I had come to serve. Yet never had I had such a strong feeling that somewhere there was a god. That feeling was a terror greater than any mortal fear, and was hard to think on. But there was nothing here but the falling water: it had fallen over the rocks with the same voice since my youth, since my childhood, since I had been born. Its water was like my life, flowing through time, and full of motion —but, unlike the water, my life flowed all the time as I made it flow. I chose my own courses. The running stream reminded me of the blood of kings: I chose my path, but the water of my blood was not wholly mine.

That pool, I thought, had been filled till it overflowed since Gandria had been shaped. It spoke with no words, but it seemed to know, and it brimmed over with that unspoken knowledge. It was unbearable. I wept, but why I did not know; my tears fell into the pool; the waters of the wood fell into the pool; the pool spilled over and flowed far to the south and west, to Tarrabelner and thence to the Great Sea, and all my life seemed to flow with it. My melting was drawing to its completion. The Jewel felt heavy and cold. I washed my eyes in the cold water. I felt light and hollow, as though I had no substance at all.

I looked at myself in the pool. I drew the long tresses of my hair back. There, like a third eye, glinted Sterreth.

I leaned closer, peering into my own eyes. Images of my life played upon the water from my mind. I thought back. How had I denied myself? How had I avoided the road that would have led me to the Throne? I had seemed hard from the first, even with Alina in my youth. Perhaps I would never have walked that road. The world closed in on me.

But, as I looked, something moved, and I saw the face of my mother looking down at me. I was crying out to her, but my cry was silenced. I could not reach her. As soon as she had come to me, she was gone.

I was alone in the wood, a babe only. A great grief and fear was in me. There, alone and afraid, I rejected her for leaving me. I denied her myself.

But there was something else, another face. It was above me. It was a stone face, green-shrouded, a woman's face on a statue. I thought I knew it. I saw love there, endless love, pouring over me regardless. But I could see no more in the water.

My nose touched the pool and the images were gone. I slid into the water. Deeper and deeper I went, now wading, now crawling, into the shadows along the stony bottom, completely under the surface now. It was still, and cold, but every movement I made created a thousand tiny swirling currents around me, spinning away into the icy gloom. Darkness and silence, and the faint motion of the water, surrounded me —time was no longer even a growing thing, as it had been while riding through the wood: it was here, under the water, in the darkness, floating with me, transparent, cold, one thing, one movement, my every action rippling off into infinity. In the water there was no end, no

beginning, only a swirling, silent current, in which I had no weight at all.

There came a dull roar from some distance away, like blood rushing louder in my ears. I drifted slowly on my back beneath the surface. Up there the stars danced on the water, now larger, now smaller, moving quickly and with life beyond my reach, like others' lives on the surface of my own. I watched the little points of fiery light, swimming, such small things yet so alive, no longer cold and still but wild and swift. Through the window of the water they were not so very far away. It was I who had made them so. They were close, in truth, or far away, as I willed it. They looked to me so like my children, whom I loved.

The dull, persistent roar was nearer. Suddenly, I was buffeted downwards and my foot touched the bottom of the pool. My body was racked with a spasm, seeking air, and the liquid stars now seemed very distant. I was beneath the torrent of falling water. The tumbling currents pushed at me. I struggled to rise, realising I couldn't breathe. I flailed wildly, drowning.

My foot came into contact with stone again and I pushed with all my strength for the lights above. In a rush of air and water I came to the surface away from the falls. Without breath, I was swept onto the damp sward of grass at the pool's edge and somehow crawled to my knees. Water poured out of me; my body gasped the air into itself.

The starlit night was cold but warmer than the depths of the pool. Someone threw a cloak over me. I breathed fully again.

The light of dawn grew and the first birds burst into song,

oblivious of the affairs of the world. Trees took on their daytime shapes; shadows faded into the grass. In the far west the few remaining stars glinted at the day. A lone shaft of light beamed into the glade.

I opened my eyes. I was shaking, I ached. I felt the warm sun on my back. These things seemed the same to me, the same experience, the experience of being.

I looked down at myself. My youth had vanished from me: my skin was looser, and my body shrunken. I looked in the water. My face was older. I felt weary, but it was a weariness of body, not of spirit.

‘What —what has happened?’ I asked the Herald, who stood beside me.

‘Dost thou not know? Hast thou not yet seen? Look into the water! Look again!’ he said, and helped me.

At first all I could see was the bottom of the pool, the early sunlight on the many hues of brown and gold amongst the pebbles, painted there as though by the stream —but then my eyes caught the reflection of myself on the glittering surface. It settled into stillness. Peering closer, I saw that my brow was bare. The Jewel was gone.

I looked up at him, amazed, feeling my wrinkled forehead.

‘Sterreth’s fire has been quenched,’ he said. ‘Thou art free.’

I looked around the dell as the sun rose above the Mountains of Morning far away and poured light relentlessly into the wood. Trees loomed all around me; the sky opened above. My eyes were drawn to the tall man standing by me. I felt that his roots were deeper than the trees of that wood.

‘Where art thou from, my lord?’ I said.

‘Where indeed?’ he said, looking into the water. ‘I am a mortal, like yourself —but I serve Raendu, and when he spoke to me, my soul roamed in the Cavern of Myriad Lights far beneath the Land of Stars whence comes the Sun, and I had no mortal name, nor needed one. And when, following him, I climbed out of the sacred mountain that is called Varn’s Peak, and saw across the world, and walked with the Unicorn in the forest, I took no thought to what I was to be called, nor where I was from. Whence come any of us, in truth?’

I looked down at my old hands.

‘I have wasted my life in pursuit of false dreams when the High Throne might have been mine,’ I said —but I said it without bitterness, for the time had come and gone, and I had not chosen that road.

‘Thou rejected the lie of the Jewel at the last,’ said he.

I fell silent. Despite my old body, my heavy skin, my weariness, I felt an exultation of spirit that I had never felt before. I looked around again at the sunlit glade, and slowly turned east, towards Tara and the Mountains of Morning.

‘I shall never return, shall I?’ I said quietly.

The Herald shook his head gently.

‘Thou art old beyond thy years now. The lie that was the Jewel cheated thee of many years of mortal life, and all of it has now gone with Sterreth to the bosom of the Great Sea, far away.’

‘Then what hope is there for my children, or Tara, or Shand, or all the lands that look to fill the High Throne? Did the whole destiny of the world depend on my choices?’ I said.

'The ways of the world forever depend on the choices of mortals,' he replied, 'but fear not: this world's hope is larger than thee. And thy children are now heirs to the Throne.'

'But I shall never see them again. Who shall protect them from the hardness of things?'

'I came to thee for this,' said the Herald, 'not just for the sake of the Throne, but because, in my folly, I abandoned thee, thinking thee safe, and chose the quieter road myself. I have been called forth from the place of my rest, and must serve thee again. Raendu's mercy is real.'

I looked at him —my eyes were old now, but they were mine at last. I did not understand all that he said, but I thought of Arime and Syra.

'Dost thou then swear to watch over them?' I said.

'I swear. But they too must make their own choices.'

'Syra?'

He nodded gently. I had no need to say more of my fear. I looked away.

'What of the Green Lady? Wherefore came she into my tale?' I asked after a while.

'Alagar, it seems,' he said, 'escaped from the attack of the Shadowed Men and came through the fences of enchantment to the Glade of the Seven Statues. Thou wert placed at the feet of the Statue of the Green Lady before thy mother fainted —there the Companions found thee when the evil had passed.'

'Then the face I saw above my mother's —the face of the statue— was that of one of the Seven,' I said quietly to myself. 'The Seven who came into the world before the beginning.'

The sun, Raendu's Star, rose into the sky, and all the world glowed under it as silence fell between us. He did not answer me. The whole world seemed wider then than it had ever been. And I felt wider too.

'It is said that there is in this world a Gate for those who grow weary of it,' I said at last. He nodded.

'Do the graves of my mother and father lie far from here?' I asked.

'No,' he said.

'Then take me to them,' I said.

And so we left the Pool of Kaela in its quiet valley and went through the depths of the Wood of Seven, vanishing swiftly into the green. Behind us the whispering water fell endlessly over the stone steps into the pool.

I did not return to my realm, nor shall I ever now claim the High Throne. My whole spirit burned away in the passion of the Jewel, and I have little life left. But, as I came to this hut in the wilderness where the Herald brought me, he told me other news of the lands outside. He told me of Hrimae.

Hrimae did not return to Tara either. He perished in the Dark Isles, slain by Korreth the Black Spear, deadliest of the weapons of the Reavers—but as he fell he killed its wielder with his golden sword. Yarin his lieutenant and dearest friend carried him down to the sea and lay him in a boat with his captured treasure and weapons and the boat was set to drift out to sea, according to his last wish. Whether it came to rest on some distant shore, or was borne east to the Land of Stars, or sailed the sea forever no one knew, though some

said it drifted to the west at last, towards Tara.

No doubt it will be said that I died somewhere in the Wild. Or perhaps some song will be made of it, and they will say that Ryna's spirit can sometimes still be seen, youthful as spring, watching the eastern horizon from the windows of the Star Chamber, especially on nights of storm—but they will say that those who have seen her see no magic gem on her brow. Let them say that, at least—but then, let them say what they will, for all songs flow with the same water as life, and that water goes down to the sea.

I sit here now, with the fading light of a falling sun at my back, and I look out upon the graves of my father and mother here in the heart of the Haunted Wood, and find that these words must come to an end. And only now, at the end, do I see the pebbles at the bottom of the stream. Would that I had looked beyond my own reflection and seen them sooner!

This tale is no song, nor art, nor was it meant to be. But it needed to be told, if only for my children's sake. I wish I could see my children again, and Hrimae, and all those I loved and still love. But I have myself, at last, and that is a comfort beyond words.

I bequeath this tale to the Herald of Raendu, he who with many names would be nameless—and maybe through him it will find its way even into the Book of Seven, which they say is at Wenfold, where I did not walk; they say it is written by enchantment and contains all the tales of the World, from its beginning. Perhaps there my children will read it, should they walk that way.

And maybe that Book tells of the end of things too.
So say I, Ryna, who am Mistress of Tara no longer.

THE FOUNDATION OF GANDRIA

'Can you hear the rain, child?' Grandfather said, tapping his stick on the wooden wall. All around us where we rested in the little shrine, the rain fell in its quiet cascade, filling the green forest with small noises. 'They say that Our Father's rain falls only lightly upon the world —if it falls too heavily, the world can no longer be. All that we know would wash away, melting into nothing. Only the music of that rain would be heard, only the music. Can you hear that music now, child? They say that all rain comes from the Fountain, which is at the heart of the Wood which existed before the World began. Hearken now, I'll be quiet. Listen, listen...'

I listened to the steady pattering upon the leaves all around us, the heavier and hollower sound of the droplets on the narrow roof of the shrine above us, the lighter tinkle of water striking water as it built up in puddles just beyond our feet, the faint sounds of fresh streams seeking their way down the hillsides. I knew that a story was coming, from my grandfather's inexhaustible fund of tales, a story of the distant past, of times long ago. Whenever he spoke of those far-off times it was easy to imagine that, as a young boy like me, he had sat at the feet of his grandfather, who had sat at the feet of his grandfather before him, and so on back into the morning of the world —but it was not so, he said. Yes, he had learned the tales, but they had been coaxed out of him by his elders, brought into the light of the waking world from those

parts of him that were asleep. 'You think you are dreaming,' he would say to me, 'but you are remembering.'

It was something he insisted upon, and made me learn — that he had been there himself. I used to think it was part of his special magic, that he was a great teller of tales, and that his mind was a huge cave full of secrets, but as I grew older, I grew wiser and could appreciate the truth of what he told me. When he spoke of the Seven Companions, he spoke of the Eternal Number; when he related their story, he spoke of the things that danced down through the ages to the present day. Grandfather became one of the Seven, as was I, as was my father, as was my mother, as was my sister. As a child at first I could not see it —but slowly I came to feel it. There was no emptiness: there was the Dance of the Seven, and it filled all of time, and I had been in the Dance since it began. Dreams, memories, images bubbled up like a fountain through the stones of sleep and forgetfulness.

As he began to speak, Grandfather's blind eyes seeing what I could not see, my own mind wandered down the path into the deep and dripping forest...

Before the world began, young Raendu wandered in the greenwood. He looked up at the silent towers around him, and reaching out to touch their living and vibrant skins he wondered at their majesty. As he walked he did not notice that in his reverie he had meandered from the known paths and waded now through a green lushness waist deep, uncaring of his way and unable to see where he was placing his feet. As he peered up at the small circle of light which was the distant sky far above, he missed his footing and

slipped, slithering down a steep hill under the fronds of bracken and emerging wet and green himself in a small clearing with sheer sides, at the very bottom of which was hidden a small pool of fresh water trickling from a rivulet near at hand. The water seemed deep emerald but was clear, and the faraway sunlight shone back at him from its depths as though a tiny fragment of light itself had made a private home there and danced on the water for its own amusement.

For what seemed like a long time Raendu remained there, peering into the water and watching the light play upon the pond, and he thought he saw visions moving within the water of things he had never known. There was at first a mighty darkness so that it seemed he looked through to the centre of the world where no light had ever been nor would ever come; then this darkness sparkled with lights like many coloured lanterns; but a frost came and winds howled like wolves, and the lands that he had glimpsed with the light of those lanterns failed and were destroyed. Sudden images came to him of things he did not understand but which filled him with anxiety: he pictured blood, and the passing of seasons, and saw many faces he did not know, and the water itself seemed disturbed as he looked deeper into it, calling out to those that he saw—but at the end, as calm as the trees of the wood, the face of his Father looked out at him as though all that he had seen had been but a passing ripple that, when becalmed, settled into an eternal picture of tranquility and wisdom which embraced it all.

In the end he made to climb out of the steep little gully into which he had slipped, but found that his hands could not grip the young fronds of bracken, nor could his feet find

any purchase on the gully walls. He did not know how long he stood there, and the memory of what he had seen in the water began to trouble him once more as he struggled to get away. He cried out, but his voice only echoed in the deep emptiness—but at last his Father came to him and threw down into the gully a long staff. Using the staff, Raendu was able to clamber out of the slippery pit and walk again upon the forest floor with his Father.

When they came again to the broad opening in the wood where the Fountain eternally cast its silver water into the bright air, Raendu made to give back the staff that his Father had thrown down to him.

'Keep it, my son,' said his Father. 'You will soon come to another dark place, and there you may be glad of it.'

Raendu did not know what his Father meant, but he kept the staff wherever he went and soon would not go walking in the wood without it.

As the timeless summer of the wood drew on, Raendu found another forest path that he did not know, and being keen to explore that boundless forest and find new wonders within it, he set off to follow it. The light was at first good and the rain still fell gently all about him from the Fountain, but soon he had left the regions of light, and could not feel the rain.

After a while he came upon a sleeping figure lying across the path. He shook the woman awake. The stranger did not recall her name nor how she came to be asleep there, remembering only the whispers of a shadow that had led her on and taken away her living thoughts, replacing them with

sleep. But she agreed to walk a way with Raendu until they came upon someone who might know her name and home.

Many things moved in the undergrowth as they travelled; their path wound about and up onto hillsides and down into broad and pleasant valleys, and young Raendu was excited as he knew that they had by now walked further than he had ever been before, and he had long ago left behind the familiar lands around the Fountain. But he had the Staff with him, the Staff that his Father had given him, and he was comforted and did not turn back.

Soon they saw a tall shadow which moved without form or face between the trees. They froze at first, watching it as one might watch the shadow of a cloud slide slowly across a field, but it danced in and out of the greenwood, untied to wind or light.

'What is your name?' called out Raendu to the Shadow, which at first seemed playful, flitting as it did around the mighty boles of the immense tress which stretched as far as Raendu could see—but the Shadow laughed and did not answer him. At last, Raendu noticed, they had wandered again, chasing it, far from the path they had been following.

The Shadow then disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared, leaving them in a dark and overgrown part of the wood, and Raendu's friend, whom he called Brona, meaning Nameless One, grew afraid, but Raendu comforted her. 'I still have the Staff that my Father gave to me,' he said, 'and with it we will surely find our way back to his Fountain at the heart of the Wood.'

So they went back, seeking the path, but as they passed by a wide glade in the forest, Raendu heard a voice singing, a

sound more beautiful than any bird, and leaving Brona, who would not follow when she saw the bright light ahead, he went on alone into the shining clearing.

There sat a beautiful woman, bathing herself in a bright stream, surrounded by golden flowers. A pale light was about her, and Raendu was enchanted by her and remained still for a long while listening to her singing. Then he crept forward—she did not see him until he was almost upon her, so delicately did he tread. He saw her face in the water of the stream, and he fell in love with her beauty. But she looked at his reflection and it seemed as though there was a great light in his eyes which called to her. At first she was afraid, for she had lived alone in the forest for as long as she could remember, and she made to run off into the deeper wood behind, but he raised his hand and offered her the Staff as a sign of peace. She reached out and took it and smiled. In silence, Raendu led her back to where Brona waited, shivering, and the radiance of the woman of the flowers warmed them and Brona's fears fell away. The flower-woman's name was Kaela, and Raendu loved her laugh and her dance and the golden blossom of her eyes. Together they went on, growing merry and dancing as they went, and all the wood was filled with that joyful sound.

As they went, they found other companions in the Wood—the giant Deldellu, the fiery Surinor, the blue-eyed Raella, and the dark Nilnie, who at first Raendu thought was the Shadow who had led him astray, so black and swift did she seem, but she said that another dwelt deep in the Wood who preyed on the unwary traveller and sought to lead them

away from the paths around the Fountain and into the trackless depths where neither light nor the rain of the Fountain reached —this darker figure was called Aradu, whose name meant 'shadow', and Raendu supposed that it had been he who had drawn Brona and himself into the deep wood.

As the Seven Companions went on, the trees grew taller and wider, and less and less light reached the ground of the forest, and some wanted to turn back —but Raendu was keen to explore further and held up the Staff, leading them deeper into the twilight of a narrow valley whose sides ached with trees so huge and heavy that it was a wonder they did not topple over. Above them the branches of these trees were so entwined that a twisted ceiling was formed through which no light came —and there Raendu saw a different kind of light, which as they drew closer he realised was a fire, flickering red and gold in that silent place.

Before the fire sat a hooded shape, its back to them, and all except Raendu and Nilnie felt a shiver of fear. Nilnie placed her hand on Raendu's shoulder in warning, but he stepped forward.

'Hail, stranger,' he said, holding out the Staff in greeting — but the figure turned and Raendu saw that his face was like Raendu's own except that it was dark and full of a cold spirit. And instead of placing his hand upon the Staff in greeting, the Stranger gripped it and tried to wrest it from Raendu's grasp. They struggled for a long while, and the other Companions held back at Nilnie's bidding —then there was a crack and the fighters fell apart, and Raendu was holding the Staff still, but part of it was broken off and in the hands of the

Shadow. Aradu —for it was he— claimed the piece of the Staff that had broken off, and called it the Wand of Winter. He laughed with triumph and vanished in darkness, and the fire went out and all the Companions save Nilnie dashed about seeking light. At last Nilnie gathered them together and walked forward with them until they reached the end of the Hall of Trees and were again in the deep green wood. She and her daughter Raella, who was wise in woodcraft, found the forest paths and led the Companions back to the Fountain where they were all glad to feel its gentle rain upon their faces.'

'And what became of Aradu and the Wand of Winter?' I asked after a while as Grandfather fell silent.

His sightless eyes turned to me.

'Take my stick,' he said, and I took the light yew wood and balanced it in my hand.

'Now ask yourself —what became of Aradu and the Wand of Winter. Ask!'

I pondered Grandfather's words. He had taught me this, that all tales were not a weaving but a remembering. I closed my eyes...

After Raendu's return from the Wood with his Companions, Raendu grew restless. He began to wonder if the Wood was endless, or whether there were things, worlds, hopes, visions, beyond the Wood. He asked his Father about this, but his Father did not answer him for some time. Then one day, when he had resigned himself to be content, his Father took him again deep into the forest, along a path that

Raendu had never seen before. For a long time in that timeless place they walked, travelling further even than Raendu had travelled on his adventure, and Raendu grew tired, but his Father encouraged him to keep walking until they came to a vast green wall, overgrown with an ivy so deep and yet so fresh and green that the stones beneath it seemed lost forever in a dappled emerald dream of time.

'Take your Staff of Life,' his Father said, 'and lift aside the ivy.'

Raendu did so and beneath the green branches was a small, hidden door, thick and heavy. Raendu's Father took out a small silver key and turned it in the lock. The door swung open, and Raendu looked out on a world in darkness, blown by nameless winds, a vast and limitlessly high world of wilderness and dreams.

'Beyond the Wood, my son,' said the Father, 'is the World. There you may wander as you wish. But remember, when you grow weary, there is this Gate. And weary you may grow, for your Staff is broken, and Aradu your brother has its other part and he may be a burden to you. Remember the Fountain and its forgiving rain, my son, and remember the way back, and the silver key.'

Then the Father placed the small key in Raendu's hand and walked away, but Raendu followed him back to the Fountain, and did not speak of the Gate for a long time to any of his Companions.

The Children of Tara

Book Two of
The Sword Sundergost

THE DREAM OF THE SWORD

*Sundergost the Golden,
Dragon's bane and borning,
From the dark pit beneath
To the new morning.*

-from The Book of Seven

Prince Arime ran out from the edge of the shining wood, down the slope, across the stream and towards the sound of the hammer's beat. A soft mist hung back from the blacksmith's forge, where, deep within the shadows, a strong fire burned.

'Hey, there, Firefoot!' cried the smith, as the prince ran past him into the clutter of tools and weapons at the back of the forge. 'Not so swift! There are blades back there lad, that would slice you in two as soon as look at you.'

Arime laughed.

'You need not speak to me as though I were a child, Barragath,' he said, 'I know well enough what swords can do—have you not taught me yourself their wicked ways?' He paused, becoming thoughtful, then added: 'But swords cannot see, can they, Barragath?'

'All the more reason to fear them. Watch your young hide in here, as I've told you often enough before—to me you're still the boy I first taught how to swing a blade. I'm old enough for you to still seem a child,' the smith said, bringing the bright hammer down to bounce on the steel he held on the anvil before him. The younger man sat down on a dusty

bench and stared into the flames.

‘Barragath,’ he said after a while, as the smith went on hammering, ‘swords cannot really see, can they?’

‘What do you mean?’ Barragath said, not taking his eyes from the hot metal as the hammer punched sparks from it.

‘Well...’ Arime began, but faltered. The smith, heavy with his work, thrust the metal strip back into the flames and looked at him.

‘I had a dream,’ he said at last.

The smith began hammering again. Between the blows, Arime went on.

‘I dreamt that it was night. There were stars, and a moon. I was alone, and it was cold.’

Barragath paused, swinging the hammer, as he turned the metal on the anvil, not looking up.

‘So you dreamed. You’re not alone in that. Go on,’ he said, striking again.

‘There was a light. I thought it was the dawn, but it wasn’t. I walked up a great hill. It was very high. The wind grew strong. I thought I would brush the stars with my head. But there were no stars —there was stone above. And then I was there at the top, and it was there before me, shining.’

‘What was there?’

‘A sword. A golden sword. Shining. It seemed to speak to me, to be watching me. I couldn’t understand the words...’ he paused. Barragath had stopped hammering and was listening to him intently, a gleam in his eye. He said nothing for a while, then looked away, across the meadow, into the sunlit woods.

‘Listen, lad,’ Barragath said, stepping nearer, ‘tell no one of

this, save your tutor, Tarazion. Do you promise me this?’

‘Dreams are sometimes important, then?’ Arime asked. ‘What is it, Barragath?’

‘Do you promise?’

“Yes! But what does it mean? Can swords speak?”

‘Not often, lad, not often —but many strange things happen in this world. Go on now, go and practice your swordplay in the woods and let me get on with my work,’ the smith replied. Arime left, and had soon disappeared into the trees. The smith watched him, then wiped his black hands on a cloth, and walked quickly off towards the Houses.

Arime looked at the slender silver blade in his hands. It was not the sword he had seen in his dreams, but it got him thinking. As he held it balanced in his hand, and swung it in glittering arcs in the bright sun, he wondered what Barragath had meant. He had felt the weight of the Sword in his dream too —the importance of it. What was that vast chamber in which he had climbed the great hill? And where did it lie? But perhaps it was only a landscape of his mind, and meant nothing at all.

He swung the sword he held, practising the different techniques that the smith had taught him. Arime had never used a sword in anger, but Barragath had told him of the wars with the Reavers that had scourged the land only a few years before, while he had still been a child: the terrible Reavers from the Dark Isles, Tara’s ancient enemies. They had come in force against the coastlands, burning and harrying. The people of Tara had at that time grown soft with

too much luxury, and idle with too much peace, and they trusted in the oath which the King of the Reavers had sworn to their Mistress, never to set foot in Tara uninvited—but their Mistress had gone, and some said that the Reavers had after all been invited: for had not she herself opened the door to them in her reign?

Arime had often thought on this, for the Mistress of Tara had been his mother, Ryna. Over and over in his mind went the events of his youth—he pored over them seeking something, he knew not what. His mother had left him when he was very young—he did not know why. She had left all of Tara, abandoning it, some said, to the enemy that she had called. There was a darkness in his soul, he felt, because of that. He swung the sword harder as he thought of it again now. Why had she left him? And what had truly happened to her? For she had never returned to Tara—she had ridden west, the Earl Marshal said, over the mountains, and had not returned, just as Hrimae, his father, had not returned from the Dark Isles.

But Hrimae he could understand: he at least had left with sword in hand, seeking out the enemy and slaying even the King of the Reavers himself, before he perished. His mother Ryna he could not understand, for not only had she left him in the night, riding off into the wide lands and mystery, but he wondered if what they said about her were really true, that she was indeed enchanted, bewitched, possessed by an evil power—the power of the Jewel Sterreth that she wore, they said, on her brow.

Tara had been surrounded by enemies then, after Ryna had left—the Reavers gathering for war in their eastern isles;

Shadowed Men arming in the strongholds of the Dark Circle; Baladac, the evil Prince of Turgal, waiting with his hosts in the south to wreak vengeance on the land he coveted. But for a while at least peace had been purchased —Yarin had returned one golden morning with Hrimae's fleet, and Baladac had been called away to deal with the rebellion that his older brother fostered in Turgal, and a new hope had swelled in the hearts of the people, as though a weight had been lifted from them, for they had lived long in the light of the Jewel, and the light of the fresh sun, though it be reddened with their own blood, had seemed better to them at last. The Reaver's ships that had taken the harbour of Alathosa below the High Houses had been burned —but the peace that followed was an uneasy one.

Barragath had told Arime of the way of the world: kings came and went, he said, but the shadow of evil had entered the world long ago, and would always find mortals to do its work. A new king had been crowned in the Reaver-lands, and the raids on the coastlands continued from season to season. Even now, when Arime was eighteen years old, seventeen of those years, since his mother had left him, had been spent in sharpening swords for war, and in cleaning them afterwards. Tara had come out of its spell into the real world of strife and anguish: its people had suffered —they were themselves again, Barragath had said, free as anyone else to make a realm for themselves, and as subject as anyone to woe.

Arime had asked Barragath about the Jewel. He knew that the smith had been with his mother when she had taken it from the idol of the dark god in the citadel of the enemy. But

Barragath would speak only a little of it —how its unearthly light silenced men’s tongues; how it ebbed and waned like a tide of moonlight on its mistress’s brow; how she used it to see into and speak to the hearts of men and women, and how they followed her because of it. It was a great wonder, he had said —but a thing not meant for mortal use. He had seen it eat up Ryna’s soul. And then Barragath would say no more. He had not been with her at the end. She had ridden from Tara on a night of storm, and Anyae the Earl Marshal had been the last to see her alive, and he was now dead himself —poisoned, some said.

But Arime thought perhaps there was more he could discover. For, within a short while of Ryna’s departure, while he was still too young to remember, there came to Tara a tall lord of men, dressed in robes of red —Tarazion he called himself, but Arime knew that the name meant simply ‘Wisdom-bringer of Tara’. He wore a black patch over his right eye, and seemed as one who had journeyed far; Arime could not guess his age. He was not old, but neither was the gleam in his eye the gleam of youth. Some said he came from distant Rondar, the land where minstrels reigned in the distant west, by the waters of the great river Tarrabelner; others said he was from the north, and had come from the wide, cold plains of Hethrian, where lay the way to Valadria, northernmost kingdom of Shand. Arime did not know which tale to believe: Tarazion knew many songs, many tales, and could sing like a minstrel, but then sometimes Arime would find him gazing north from the battlements of the High Houses with longing in his one eye

He had become Arime’s tutor and guardian, with the

consent of the lords of Tara, who seemed to regard the red-robed newcomer with a hushed respect. It was these things which Arime thought together might lead him further towards an answer to his mother's mystery: he felt convinced that Tarazion knew something that he had not told. Had he seen Ryna? Had he been sent by her to watch over him? And what was his true name? Soon, Arime often thought, he would find out.

He sat down now under a great beech tree to gather his breath and his thoughts. The dream of the sword disturbed him still. He could not forget the bright image of that shining blade. He had to see Tarazion, and ask him about it. It was now almost noon, he judged, glancing at the sun. His tutor would be with his sister. His heart chilled at that. Yes, he thought, Syra, daughter of Ryna, older than he, and now Warden of Tara under Tarazion's guidance. Why could he not love Syra? What was it that seemed to irk him about her? All through his childhood he had felt the guilt of that lack of love—but as he had grown older, he had wondered. He stood up and made his way towards the white towers of the High Houses.

'I want to see Tarazion,' Arime protested.

'He is very tired,' Syra said softly, watching the wind pluck at the red and blue banner through the tall window of the antechamber. 'What can it be that is so urgent?' She turned to him at last in her long blue robe, her dark hair like a shadow about her face.

Arime was afraid of Syra, he realised as he stood there. Apart from her height and her voice—she was very tall, and

spoke with the smoothness of oil— he disliked her hands with their many large rings, glinting on long fingers which flexed and moved continuously, like pale, bejewelled spiders. But he was too angry to be denied.

‘Why will you not stand aside?’ he said, loudly. ‘He is my tutor too!’

The hands stopped moving. Syra turned away from him to the window again.

‘Cease this noise!’ she snapped. He fell quiet and looked at the floor. ‘Now you know, Arime,’ she went on, more gently now, ‘that since mother went away, I have had to do many of the things she once did. I have had to be many different people, Arime. I have sometimes had to be like your mother. Listen to me, my brother, though it be hard: you were a great burden to her, Arime, a great burden. It is now eighteen years since you were born, and you would not remember what a strain you were for her to bear. She never really recovered from your birth, you know, not really. She should not have had another child, with all that strain of the wardenship. It may have been the thing that was too much for her..’

‘Shut up!’ shouted Arime, whose blood had been rising with tears.

Syra came floating across the room towards him, her arms open.

‘Oh, Arime. It is hard to be a man,’ she said in her soft voice. ‘But I am here, my little one, I am here.’ Her pale hands stroked his dark hair.

‘I want to see Tarazion,’ Arime said softly.

‘Why?’

‘To speak of my dream,’ he said.

'Dream? What dream?'

Arime looked up into Syra's face. Her skin was so white, her hair so dark, like a moon in the night sky. Her eyes pierced him. He could not speak for a moment and she stroked her rings as she waited for him. 'No,' he began, at last recalling his promise to Barragath, 'only Tarazion.'

Syra swirled round in a great blue circle and walked away from him.

'Very well,' she said, 'pray don't run to me in future if you don't trust me. After all, I'm only our mother's eldest and most favoured child, Princess of the Province, Warden of Tara. Who am I to be privy to your secrets?'

But Arime did not reply, and stalked from the room, leaving his sister staring after him, her eyes alight with an icy flame.

Arime looked out of the window of his high chamber. He could see down into the wide bay of Alathosa, the Port of Tara, where many ships with green and red and golden sails stood, like small toys in a pond. The sun was shining. The green woods in the foothills that rose steeply from the bay were full of the flush of an early spring. Golden and blue banners flapped in the fresh breeze from the south.

There was a knock on the door. Arime turned and shouted 'Enter!'

A man in a long red robe came in, closing the door behind him. His beard, greying, was flecked with an earlier gold. He looked at Arime with his one bright eye set in a deep face.

'You wished to see me, my lord?' he said, but Arime was already rushing across the room to him.

‘Tarazion!’ the prince cried. ‘How did you know? Did Syra tell you?’

‘I have ways of knowing things,’ replied the one-eyed man. ‘Tell me of this dream of yours.’

‘You know about that too?’ said Arime, looking at his tutor in wonder. ‘But I have told no one save Barragath. He said not to speak to anyone of it but you.’

‘There is no magic in this, unless you call the friendship of true friends magic: Barragath came and told me himself, fearing that you may not be able to see me soon enough—for one reason or another.’

Arime nodded—he knew that there was no love lost between Syra and Tarazion, and that their companionship was strained, forced by circumstance rather than created by desire: Tarazion was her guardian too, and she received his guidance—but she resisted him, and seemed to despise his presence in Tara.

‘It’s a fine day,’ Tarazion said, looking out of the window. ‘Why don’t we walk along the battlements for a while? Then you can tell me all about it.’

The sky was indeed fine, a thin blue, coated with a high, white haze as they walked in the warm breeze from the south. From the top of the High Houses, Arime could see in every direction except west: there, the white peaks of the Mountains of Morning loomed up, a wall of stone blocking the way to the wide lands of the western plains, where lay the Fields of Shand, and many other realms that Arime had only heard of from tales, and never seen. But he could see far to the north. There the coast of Tara faded behind ridge after ridge of forested slopes into the blue rim of the world. And

south he could make out, as the coast curved in a broad sweep eastwards, the line of the inlet of the sea that led to the Pass of the South, and beyond that he could imagine the marshes, and the vast plains of Turgal and the southern lands. Directly east there was nothing but the shimmering ocean. He knew that that way lay the Dark Isles and the homes of the Reavers, who had harried the realm for generations, but they were beyond his sight, and he could only see the dark blue line where the sea met the sky.

As they walked, he told Tarazion all he could remember of the dream. Details of it were fading fast in his mind, and did not seem so important in the full light of morning, but the image of the Sword itself still burned strong. Tarazion was very interested, and listened carefully. They stopped and sat in a stone seat in the corner of the tower. No one else was to be seen. Not even the noises of the Houses came to them from below, and only the flapping of a blue banner reminded them of the wind, from which they now sat sheltered.

‘What does it mean? Is it important?’ asked Arime, as he noticed the strange look on his companion’s face.

‘Perhaps,’ Tarazion replied slowly, ‘but perhaps not. Dreams are only dreams—in sleep the minds and hearts of mortals become tangled, and the wreckage of life floats like driftwood, making patterns that only a fool would seek meaning in. Some dreams are not dreams, though, but glimpses of something else, something beyond life.’

Tarazion paused and looked long into Arime’s face. After a while, he seemed to come to a decision.

‘It is time for part of the picture to be shown to you at last, I think,’ he said. ‘But which part? And how should I begin?’

Arime felt suddenly as though he were on the edge of a cliff—he did not want to plunge over its edge. He grasped at the brightest thing in his mind.

‘Tell me of the Sword!’ said Arime. ‘It seemed to speak to me, though I could not catch the words. Are there such things as speaking swords, Tarazion?’

‘I suppose you could say that there were,’ said Tarazion, ‘but if they speak, it is not often for the ears of mortals, I would think, and I do not know their language. But perhaps that is as good a point as any to begin, for in a way this whole tale is the tale of a golden sword, around which our own lives are wound. Let me tell you the tale of the Sword Sundergost, the greatest blade ever forged for the use of a mortal’s hand, the sword whose name means “Hope”.

‘Where now you see this broad blue sea before you, there once lay a wide and bright land, a wondrous and magical place, and Kaela, the Lady of the Flowers, ruled long over it in peace, as you will know if you pay heed to any of the old tales which are still sung of it in its glory. But in the end the Dragons came, freed from the Underworld, and they rose like a spectre from the caverns of the earth, breathing the subterranean fire which consumed all.

‘Arazon the Golden-handed, to atone for his part in the freeing of the Dragons, took then a fragment of the first weapon ever forged in the world, which had been made in its turn from a Dragon’s tooth, and made a powerful sword, calling it Mingost, which meant “Change-bringer” or “Herald”. It slew the Black Dragon, but it was torn from its wielder’s grasp, and lay in the bones of that beast, wheresoever he crawled in his dying agony, and it rested in

the Dragon's heart in the depths of the earth, in caverns that had never seen the light of day.

'When, many years later, the Kingdom of Shand came to its glory, a Herald of Raendu came into the realm, and told Valkurn, the High King of Shand, that the Black Dragon had come to the three eldest of the race of the Dragons in his death, and that the Sword Mingost therefore lay in their keeping. None knew where they dwelt, only that they were the guardians of the Sword, knowing it to be the only thing that could slay them, being made from the tooth of one of the fathers of their kind —and they also knew that it had the destiny of many things bound up in it.

'In time, the Herald led Valkurn down the perilous Green Road into the Underworld to the Sword Mingost, but the King was astounded with the wonders of the Dragonrealm and he took the red-hot Sword and plunged it into stone, saying that in Raendu's Dream he had no right to it or to the lives of Dragons: and for this, alone among mortals he was judged the Friend of Dragons, and the three eldest of them appeared to him and honoured him as one of their own, and gave him Mingost, binding him by his word that he would never slay any worm with it and prophesying that it would serve the cause of the Dragons too. They set it about with an enchantment that would only yield to him or his heirs, or to one as worthy —and they foretold this: that not by his hand, nor by the hand of his heirs, would that blade do its greatest deed, but that it would bring great honour and glory to Shand.

'With the Herald's guidance, the King returned to the lands of light and took the blade to the waters of Starwater

Pool on the western fringes of the kingdom of Miria, and cast it in that it might be cooled and blessed by the powers of the water. For the Herald intended that the Sword should be used to heal the world of the harms done by evil, and to help right the great wrong that had been done in releasing the Dragons into the world of light—for it was said that in many of the waters of Gandria the magic of Kaela resided still, giving them special properties.

‘But while alone and swordless, Valkurn was assailed by his traitor-son, Mallakurn, in the form of Lord Vorn the King of Vampires, and his cohorts. Valkurn was outnumbered, and despaired of death. He fell into the lake and there found the Sword, now cooled from the dragon’s fire and complete, and with it he turned the tide against his enemies and they fled—and he renamed it Sundergost, Sword of Hope.

‘With Sundergost, Shand defeated its enemies and Valkurn journeyed deep into the Underworld and slew even Valasne the Enchantress and the Serpent King Arata Gon-rinin, and the Secondpeace was brought about.’

‘Then what happened to the Sword?’ asked Arime, spellbound.

‘Patience! I am about to tell you,’ Tarazion went on. ‘When the High King finally fell, wounded to the death in the Battle of the Free by the evil spirit of his son even as Sundergost banished that spirit from the world, the King bade his servant return the Sword whence it came, down the Green Road again, to be kept in the safekeeping of the Dragons there, to be called upon again in time of need—but none had the courage for such a journey, and the Herald himself took it for safekeeping. It was he who went again, to the Hall of the

Thrain, deep under the mountains, and he returned the blade to them. But they foretold that the Sword yet had a great service to do in the cause of the Dragons, and that it had not yet done its greatest deed —and they said that a Herald and a King’s Heir would come again to that Hall under the world.’

‘And did they?’ asked Arime.

‘That remains to be seen. For the events I’ve just spoken of occurred at the beginning of the Secondpeace of Shand, and we are still living in that peace, though some say it draws to its close. Then, if war comes to Gandria again, the heir to the High Throne would need to come forth and claim his birthright, and venture into the Underworld to bring forth the Sword Sundergost. And maybe a Herald would go with him.’

There was a long silence as Arime pondered these words.

‘There hasn’t been a High King for years uncounted,’ said Arime. ‘What if he does not come?’

‘Whether or not he’ll be found, and whether or not he’ll come forth, really depends on him, wouldn’t you say?’ The old man looked at Arime strangely as he spoke. Arime trembled —the wind seemed colder with that gaze.

‘But you haven’t really told me about my dream,’ he said. ‘Is the Sword Sundergost the sword in my dream?’

Tarazion turned to him and stared into his eyes.

‘Listen carefully, prince,’ he said. ‘I have answered your question already, though you perhaps know it not. Think and feel with your heart. Do you not know what you ask? For the time has come at last, I think, for plain words and the revealing of things long hidden.’

Arime suddenly felt very ill at ease. He got up and looked over the wall at the ships far below in the bay. Some had sailed now, fishing boats or trading vessels on their way with the tide to the gates of the harbour and to the high sea beyond. The blue banner cracked in the wind.

Tarazion got up and came to his side.

‘How old are you now, Arime?’ he asked.

‘Eighteen summers,’ Arime told him.

‘Then you could be accounted a man,’ said Tarazion, ‘and men need to know their roots if they are to withstand the winds of the world.’

Arime looked up at him. Though he did not understand Tarazion’s words exactly, his heart went quiet for a moment, and somehow he knew then for certain that Tarazion knew about his mother.

‘Tell me,’ he said in a small voice.

‘Your mother,’ began Tarazion as though he had read Arime’s thought, ‘was not born in Tara, and came to be its Mistress by a strange road. I do not know if any of this tale is known to you, so I shall tell you it in brief.’

Then Tarazion spoke of Ryna —of how she had come from the Haunted Wood to Helca’s Castle in Restonia in the west, and grown up there; of how she had met the Giant of Tarthos, who had become her friend, Galatar of Turgal; of how she had ridden with the Crimson Company to adventure and war in the Middle Lands; and of how she had come eventually to Tara, and then to the Dark Isles, where she had taken the enchanted Jewel called Sterreth, and placed it on her forehead, and it had given her power over the affairs of the men and women of Tara. Some of this tale

Arime had heard; some of it was new to him. He listened as though in a dream.

‘And then came darkness into her life —or perhaps the darkness that had always been there grew greater. The Reavers, whom she had made promise never to return uninvited to Tara were invited back, and the realm was in grave peril. It was on a night of storm that she rode out of this fortress alone, on her greatest quest.’

Arime felt a great grief in himself. He was not sure if he wanted to hear more. But he forced himself to speak.

‘Why?’ he said. ‘Why did she go away? Why didn’t she come back?’

‘Arime, you are young, and maybe I expect too much in hoping that you will see this —but can you not understand? She had to do this thing, even though it meant leaving you behind. For the Jewel Sterreth was evil, and had eaten at her soul, and she knew that somehow she had to challenge its power before the end —but to do that she needed to find herself. And so she rode from here to the Haunted Wood whence she came, to find her own beginning and her end.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Arime said quietly, looking away. ‘I don’t. For I am alone, and always have been —and I never knew her, and I must love Syra instead.’

Tarazion paused, looking down at the stone floor of the battlement.

‘Perhaps one day you will read her tale as she wrote it,’ he said after a while. ‘She wrote it for you, I think. And she did not leave this life until she knew that you would be protected.’

Arime turned, his face suddenly grim.

‘Protected?’ he cried. ‘Protected against what? And by whom? I have not felt much protected from the darkness in my room at night, or the emptiness in my heart. I do not believe you.’

Tarazion sighed.

‘This is not easy for me, Arime,’ he said. ‘Indeed, among the many tasks which fall to me to do in this world, I am finding this amongst the most difficult. If you knew what has been endured by others in this, you might not speak so rashly. I, too, have left my own child, summoned forth from my own happiness by duty and the wider world —and that is harder than you know, for my heart tells me that I will not see my son again with mortal eyes. But, though my choice of words may be ill and stirs you to anger, you have nevertheless been watched. Barragath himself is one of the remaining members of the Crimson Company which rode with Ryna from Restonia long ago.’

Arime paused then in his growing fury.

‘Barragath? The smith?’ he said.

‘Aye,’ said Tarazion, ‘smith to you, and famed warrior to those who know his secret. Think you that he learned all that swordplay that he has taught you by standing at a forge? And there have been others. I myself swore to your mother to watch over you, at the end.’

‘You? You saw her at the end? Why have you not told me before?’ cried Arime, turning on his companion as though to strike him. Tarazion raised his hand.

‘Arime, put space between your thoughts!’ he said. ‘It is hard enough for you to understand now —when you were even younger there was no hope of it. I saw your mother at

the end of her ride into the Haunted Wood, and guided her to that which she sought. It is upon me that the blame lies indeed—for if I had not tarried by the road mayhap I would have reached her sooner in her life and much misery would not have come to pass. But in the end at least she found what she sought, and was freed from the evil which she had grasped to herself. Know that your mother loved you, Arime, and that for this she did what her heart told her she must do. This you must believe.'

'And yet I do not,' said Arime sullenly. 'And I see that I have been deceived all my life, not protected. What more have you to reveal to me?'

Tarazion turned and walked a few paces by the wall, before turning back and saying in a quiet voice:

'Aye, there is more, though I almost wish there were not.'

Arime did not shift his gaze from the sea, where he watched a small ship leave the shelter of the harbour and breast the high sea, looking very frail and weak against the blue-green waves of that mighty ocean.

'I may not wish to hear it,' he said after a moment.

'Mortals oft must hear that which they would not,' Tarazion replied.

Arime, by his silence, bade Tarazion go on.

'Your mother's mother was Alagar of Valadria, child of the line of the great queen. And your father was the Lord Lisaeon, son of Ravena, who had come unlooked for from the Western Wood, where long ago Valkurn's line was thought lost.'

'What are you trying to tell me?' Arime cried. 'Or are you going to recite my lineage all the way back to Terime and

Arima at the beginning of time?’ He felt suddenly very old, old and heavy, old and weary, and words and thoughts beyond his years were springing into his mind and mouth.

‘Silence!’ commanded Tarazion, in a voice that brought Arime back into the light of day. His older companion seemed taller and sterner as he went on in the High Tongue: ‘Know you that Ravena was the daughter’s daughter of the High King Vallamor of Shand, lost in the wood —and that therefore, by direct lineage, thou and thy sister are the heirs to the High Throne of the Four Kingdoms of Shand and of the Province of Tara.’

The world and its sunlight spun round and round in Arime’s eyes. He clung to the first thing that he could think.

‘Then I know why I am protected,’ he said. ‘Not for my mother’s love, but for the sake of the Throne. I thank you for the protection. I would that you could have protected me from my own dreams.’

And he turned and began walking away along the battlements, he did not know to where.

‘Arime,’ said Tarazion quietly. ‘Arime, thou hast it wrong —though how it could appear otherwise in thine eyes I know not.’ He had spoken again in the manner of the poets, or of lovers, the way Arime had rarely heard others speak, the language of song and truth. Arime paused, but could not bring himself to turn, nor did Tarazion come nearer.

‘What would you have me do?’ Arime said at last.

‘Trust my words until thou can know them to be true in thy heart,’ Tarazion said.

‘That is hard.’

‘But easier than the emptiness of knowing nothing.’

Forgive me that. It would have been hard whether thou were a king's son or a tinker's child. But these things had to be said, for I fear that time runs against us: not only thy dream signals a change in the wind. Other forces are at work, and it may be that we must act very soon. That, and thy dream, is why I come to thee now.'

Arime turned, but did not look at Tarazion. He did not understand these matters of high policy —his mind was elsewhere. He fixed his gaze on the mountains in the west.

'Did she indeed speak of me at the end?' he said.

Tarazion nodded. 'It was her first thought after Sterreth had gone.'

'Leave me,' Arime said. 'For a while.'

And he looked up into Tarazion's face through his tears, and saw, to his amazement, tears there also, in the one old eye. He remembered his tutor's words —Tarazion himself had left his own child behind. A sudden compassion and an awe swelled up in him, but he did not move or speak. Then Tarazion left him, bowing low to him for the first time, and he found himself alone on the topmost tower of the High Houses of Tara, in a quickening wind from the south.

He remained there for some time, neglecting all but his own thoughts, which were in turmoil. His mind spun —but it spun about the sword in his dream. Its coming had changed everything. He did not know whether to curse the sword or be amazed —for it had thrust into his life like a living blade until it almost seemed to him that he had died and been reborn in a morning. He felt no joy in the rebirth: his child's life of wondering peace had vanished, never to

return. But the emptiness with which he had lived all his life was now full —so full, in fact, that he could not grasp any part of it but for the shining sword at its centre: that was as firm and real as his own heart beating quickly within him, it seemed. The whole world spun about that golden blade.

He would need to speak to Tarazion again. But he was aware of a change in his manner towards his tutor. Something that had sat between them for a long while, perhaps ever since he had first met him as a child, was now gone. He did not know what it had been, only that it was no longer there. And Tarazion had had tears in his one deep eye. What was this duty that bade parents leave their children? Was he truly the Heir to the High Throne? So much whirled in his mind that he looked out from the walls of the High Houses, seeking peace —but even the wide world that he saw gleaming there could not drown the noise in his mind. He went down into the Houses. He had to find answers somewhere.

He wandered aimlessly there for a while. Syra was not in her chamber —a servant told him that she had gone riding. A sudden thought came to his mind: he knew that, in a room behind the empty throne of Tara Syra kept a great secret. With her gone, and with these weighty matters pressing on him, he found himself there even as he thought it.

It was a small room. In one corner stood a shrouded shape. No one else was about, and it was quiet and dark in the chamber. Not allowing himself to think, Arime pulled the shroud away. He gasped. A tall, silver-gilt mirror stood there, its glass dark. He had heard of such a thing in tales: they said that his mother Ryna had once looked into such a mirror —

perhaps this was the very same. He had thought that it might be here, jealously guarded by his sister. He stepped nearer. Perhaps here he might glimpse his mother, or some deeper thing; perhaps he might understand his own heart and find peace.

For a while he was lost in thought, and the mirror showed him nothing. He turned to leave, disappointed —then his eye was caught suddenly by the glint of something moving in the shadowy depths of the glass. He looked closer. It was a solitary rider, dressed, he thought, in blue, moving at a steady gallop up a gentle ridge in the bright sunlight. His mother? No: he recognised both the rider and the road. It was Syra —and she was riding up the track that led to the Dawn Tower, at least a day's ride through high and lonely country, at the top of the Mountains of Morning —the Dawn Tower, that, in later ages had been re-named the Tower of Serpents. Arime shivered, and wondered. What was his sister doing, riding alone up such a path? As he watched, she topped the ridge and was gone. He wondered at what he had seen, summoning up what he had learned from the lorebooks of Tara.

The Tower of Serpents, they said, had once been a place of great beauty —but then the Enchantress had been brought there in chains, to be guarded for an age. She had wound her evil webs about that place in her captivity, and shifted from shape to shape in its shadows, until the Tower no longer greeted the light of the dawn but swallowed it, and the Guardians called it by its darker name.

When Valkurn had ridden there, over a thousand years before Arime's birth, he had freed the Enchantress in a

bewitchment, and the Tower was forsaken and became a forbidden place where evil lurked and darkness made a foul home. But why did his sister ride there?

Here was the other part of what Tarazion had spoken of to him: for was not Syra also Ryna's child? Was she not also Heir to the High Throne? Would not Tarazion seek to protect her too? And yet, as he thought on it, Arime knew that, with Syra, Tarazion had failed: there was a darkness in his sister's heart that the guardian had not reached. He realised that this could not be the first time Syra had ridden to the Tower of the Serpents.

What had happened to her in the dark halls of that place—what had been done to her, and what she had done? What had she seen? What had led her to go there first, alone? He did not know, for she had kept it in her heart, a heart that had become blacker with the years. Arime wondered if Syra had felt betrayed, as he had sometimes done, by their mother. A rush of realisations followed his thought until he could barely keep pace with them. The mirror shifted, and in its dark pools Arime saw swift glimpses of many things, faces, movements.

Anyae—the old Earl Marshal—dying slowly of a wasting age, Arime saw—but now he saw much more. He saw Syra working below, in the kitchens, furtively—what was she doing? As he watched, it was as though a picture in his own mind, one that he had never known, unfolded before him.

It would have been merely a matter of careful and cautious envenoming of different meats and fruits: all those she knew Anyae favoured, playing upon his weaknesses in health with her knowledge of the arcane—Arime saw Syra

poring over old books, absorbing great knowledge of herbs and poisons. He saw, as the pictures moved on, what had happened then —as Anyae had physically faltered, unsuspecting, Syra, coming to the Wardenship, even more subtly poisoned his counsels in the realm —spreading rumours, passing on altered news, always carefully managing the truth to her advantage, until her enemy was looked on as a dotard by some, while others merely questioned his judgement and wisdom —but all fell away from him. In the end she triumphed. Arime saw distinctly an image of Syra alone in the moonlight —long into the night she danced alone in her chambers when she heard of his death. Why had he been her enemy? Or had other, darker minds put these plots to her?

Arime tried again to pull away from the glass, to stay the stream of dark thought, but it spilled over and swept on, and he was held by it.

There would have been others then, after Anyae, he saw: Arime himself, her accursed brother, held by some in pre-eminence over her; and the wise man, Tarazion. She feared the latter more, he saw —for Tarazion came unannounced but walked with a certainty and a nobility to which all seemed willing to do obeisance. But the lords of Tara who bowed to him were fools to her —Arime saw it all through her eyes in the mirror: it was not envy which made her hate Tarazion, it was as though something in his nature repulsed her —his eye seemed to look into her soul, into places she had long sealed off from any other, even from herself. She did not know how much he saw there, but she despised him for looking.

Tarazion had to some degree spoiled her schemes, Arime saw, and halted the workings of the slow poison she had introduced into the counsels of state, where she had been replacing clear-mindedness with areas of uncertainty, justice with inadequacy, honour with compromise, and confrontation of what was there with appeasement and closed doors. Tarazion had swept the High Houses clean in his coming—he had opened the windows she had successfully shuttered, restored to faith those she had made doubt, and replaced the weak and easily manipulated with the far-sighted and strong: but not quick enough, Arime thought. There were still many who were loyal to Syra, and many more who were loyal to her plans though they knew them not to be hers. Of those mighty among the great of Tara, perhaps she held enough to grasp even the power that her mother had possessed when the right moment came. It was the right moment very soon now, Arime felt from what he had seen—she had waited almost breathlessly for it. But even now she was too uncertain to act without visiting those to whom, in her dark worship, she had abandoned her soul.

Arime staggered back. It could not be true! None of it could be true! But the pressure of the vision, as he looked into the shadows of the glass, was relentless. It was as though a spider's web, seen by a child but never understood, had suddenly revealed its purpose and design with the appearance of the spider itself. A great deal that he had seen, heard, and suspected in Tara made abrupt sense when glimpsed through this vision, terrible though it seemed. But there were still so many questions: what was the sign she had waited for? Why did she ride forth now, in daylight? What

had summoned her again to the Tower?

Then the mirror showed him that, too.

She had had a dream. It was the same dream as his, the Dream of the Sword. He saw in the mirror how it would have seemed to her: when she reached the top of the great, dark hill, the Sword had been waiting for her as it had been for him, shining and speaking to her strange words she had not understood. The light had blinded her; the words of its song reminding her of things which she had sworn never to think of again. She had wanted nothing of it, Arime saw, and she had striven to put it out of her mind when she awoke with it haunting her in the morning—but then Arime had come, seeking Tarazion, and he had mentioned his dream also, and she had wondered, and her cold blood had run colder.

The vision passed. The glass cleared. Arime stumbled away from the mirror and out of the chamber. His mind was crowded, too crowded for clear thought. He fell to his knees before the empty throne. The Heir to the High Throne; Tarazion's promise to his mother; his sister's evil; the Golden Sword; he felt as though he was being forced out of his own life, pushed out into a brutal, new world which he did not want to see. He held his head as though it would burst. He needed peace; he needed silence and space around him.

With some difficulty, he got to his feet. He saw that he was trembling all over, as though fevered. He felt terribly cold. Where was Tarazion? Only his guardian could help him now. He had been wrong to speak so harshly to him. The burden of Syra's shadow and Arime's own foolishness must lie heavy on Tarazion's shoulders, he thought. What was he to

do? He slowly got up and went out, but with each step he felt that the weight of the world had suddenly increased until it seemed heavy indeed.

THE WOOD OF SEVEN

*Great forests covered the world in the beginning,
and their like is not to be seen now in Gandria.
but they say that all these ancient woods were but
an image and memory of the first Wood, the Wood
Before the World. And in the forest somewhere lay
the Glade of the Seven Statues, in memory of the
Time before Time when the Great Ones danced before
Raendu's Father and the Fountain of Being.*

-from The Book of Seven

Arime found himself hours later looking at ancient maps in the great hall, tracing the faded boundaries on the dusty parchment scrolls, imagining the lands that, he mused, were his own. He had not found Tarazion, nor had his tutor sought him out. In the silence of the afternoon, none of what he had heard or thought that day seemed real—he could not see how fate could ever conspire to make him High King, nor how the destiny of Tara was wound with his sister's webs. He tried not to think of his mother or what he had seen in the mirror, and for the most part he was successful—but occasionally tears would choke in his throat and he would search rapidly for another map to take his mind away to distant realms.

He heard from the servants that Tarazion was in the North Tower, locked up and alone, not to be disturbed by them or by anyone. He wondered if this command was meant to include him too, but turned his mind away from the whole

day as much as he could. The darkness of the mirror had chilled his soul —he slowly saw that through its enchantment something cold and evil had reached Syra before Tarazion had come; perhaps it had reached his mother too. He shivered.

That night, at the end of a long and quiet evening, Arime lay in bed, his mind still and blank. The moon breathed a quiet silver light into his room through the window that had been left unshuttered to let in the warm night breeze. He had successfully emptied himself of all thought, and he had been drifting to sleep dreaming of sailing in the moon's silver light out onto the high seas as he had seen the ship doing below in the harbour, when suddenly the firelight of a torch appeared in his face and he jumped awake.

'Hush!' whispered Tarazion, for it was he. 'Make no sound.'

'What are you doing? How did you get in here?' said Arime in a half-whisper. He had already climbed out of bed and was pulling on the clothes that Tarazion was offering him, such was the urgency in his guardian's voice and face.

'Hold your questions, prince,' Tarazion replied, 'until we can speak below. There Barragath awaits with swift horses.'

Holding his tongue, and with his heart beating fast and his mind beginning to spin again, Arime quickly dressed and followed his tutor to a tapestry on the wall. Tarazion pulled it aside, and Arime saw a dark hole behind, half the height of a man. A secret passage! Here, in his own room, where he had slept for years! He staggered with the shock. How much more of his life was to be stripped away? And what would he find at the bottom?

Silently he followed Tarazion through the entrance and along narrow, cold passages, lit only by the dim light of the torch held aloft in front. There was a thick layer of dust on the floor, and several places where Arime almost fell down narrow stairways which curved round and round, following the sweep of a tower and always dropping down, down to more passages below. Arime saw other gaps opening to the left and right. He wondered how they were all connected, and how they had been hidden from him for so long. Was the whole castle joined in this labyrinth of tunnels and stairs? And how many knew of them?

After several minutes of winding in and around corners in the dark, they came finally to a steep climb up what appeared to be loose soil. Then Arime found himself pushing through the thick branches of a large bush, and suddenly he was out in the open air, in a sheltered dell several yards beneath the castle's lowest tower.

Dark figures waited. He heard Barragath muttering in a whisper to Tarazion, then he climbed into the saddle of a mountain pony as the others—he thought about seven altogether—also mounted. Without any other spoken word, the little troop moved out of the dell, close under the walls of the High Houses, and began to climb a very steep mountain track which wound up into the hills behind the castle.

Moonlight dappled them all, but he could make out few faces, and would not have known that two of his night companions were Barragath and Tarazion if he had not heard them speak. They went carefully but quickly, halting at several points in the shadows as other riders passed on some nearby track—but always they went on and on, and Arime

was beginning to burst to speak when suddenly they came out in an open space and he could see more clearly around him. They were in a glade in the beginnings of the steep foothills leading up into the Mountains of Morning. The moon, now high in the sky, shone down on ridges and tall trees, away south to the edge of sight.

‘Though it would seem premature to some, here we will halt and speak, prince,’ said Tarazion, no longer whispering.

‘Then pray tell me what all this is about,’ said Arime.

‘Sire —for so I must call you now, and so have I longed to call you,’ said Barragath, coming forward on his horse, ‘your life is in danger. Reaver assassins move in Tara.’

‘Then we must go back and hold the castle!’ cried Arime. ‘And what of Syra? Where is she?’

‘Prince,’ said Tarazion, ‘Syra has betrayed you and the realm. It is she who has summoned the assassins.’

Arime fell silent for a moment, feeling himself caught up in affairs too large for him. He said nothing of his vision in the mirror. He wished they would not call him ‘Sire’ or ‘Prince’, and he heartily wished that this day had never happened.

‘But we only need to rouse the lords,’ he said after a while. ‘Surely we should not merely flee?’

‘Sire, those most loyal to you who were able to leave are here amongst us. Others have sworn to stay with their families —but there are others whom Syra has poisoned against you and who have fallen in with her,’ said Barragath.

‘No!’ yelled Arime. ‘I do not believe you!’ But what he had seen in the glass loomed large, and he knew Barragath spoke the truth.

‘Hush, prince,’ said Tarazion, looking hastily around at the trees in the moonlight. ‘We need to be far from here before long, at least in the pass and preferably through it.’

‘Where are you taking me?’ said Arime. He felt a cold panic.

‘To safety,’ replied the old man. ‘To Restonia.’

It was the name which changed Arime’s mood more than anything —the name of that realm in which his mother had dwelt. Mixed with his fear then there came the strong passion to know which struggled to override it. He became sullen.

‘Prince, whether you believe me or no, we must now ride on. Tara is lost —for the moment. You must be saved. It seems clear to me now that Syra has plotted for this moment for a long while, right under our noses. Much is the evil that she has been able to do, and I think more of it will come to light with time. But for now, we must make haste!’

The others came forward —he saw there the Lord Yarin, Earl Marshal of Tara, and other lords, who nodded to him. How many had known of his lineage he wondered? How much more than he did they still know? He nodded back to them, but his mind was black. When Tarazion led them on, he followed, but he resented them all. They rode on for some distance.

‘From youth to age is a hard road,’ Tarazion said as he pulled his horse over to Arime’s side. They were now steadily climbing a steep track at the head of a valley. The light of the moon was lost somewhere above them. Arime did not answer him, and he went on. ‘Like this track, it is often too steep and difficult by day, and we must travel it by

night and trust to our fortune. This is true for kings and beggars both.'

Arime was determined to keep his own mouth shut, though inwardly he raged.

'These lords only discovered tonight who you are,' the old man went on, as if in answer to Arime's earlier unspoken thought. 'And some of them are not too certain about it. What unites them is a love of your mother and knowledge of and hatred for the Reavers and their evil masters in the Dark Isles. And only myself and Barragath knew of the passages in the High Houses. He learned of them from me.'

Arime wondered how Tarazion had come to know of them, but he said nothing.

They rode in silence for a while, winding ever upwards as the valley climbed. Suddenly they emerged into the moonlight again. They were much higher now. All of Tara lay spread out beneath them, and a thousand, thousand stars shone down from a rich darkness overhead. Ahead of them loomed the slopes of the first mountains. It did not seem to Arime that any pass opened up in them. The wind, which had been warm below, was here chilled by snow from the peaks above. He had never been beyond those mountains in his life —yet there, on the other side, lay the answers to his life.

They rode on through that night, and another, resting only briefly in secret places under trees during the hours of daylight. Arime lived as though in a dream. A different world was unfolding around him, the world of the mountains: steep cliffs of rock and forests of pine which hung overhead like clouds, rushing water hidden in deep clefts

that suddenly opened out at his pony's feet or on either side of the narrow path, winding trails amongst boulders that, on turning a corner, opened unannounced onto precipices, from where he looked down as though from the sky on secret lakes and jumbled woods. It was a country he had never imagined—he had spent his youth in the coastal meadows and woods of Tara, and the mountains had been the edge of the world to him. The forests were alive with birds he had never before seen—occasionally an eagle could be seen circling far off, sometimes even below them as they looked down from heights of stone. He scarcely noticed the cold as they came over the top of the pass and began to wind down into the western lands, as yet hidden by spurs and shoulders of rock. His heart, silent and sullen and not a little afraid when they had set out, opened out to this land despite himself, and ever afterwards the sight or sound of the mountains would call to him with the same voice.

In time they came to a wider valley, filled at its bottom far away with a huge lake. From the cliff where they now stood, Tarazion pointed out to him the distant shapes he could see far off in the mists of a fresh morning. The sun, still behind the mountains at their back, cast a long shadow across the foothills and plains beyond, and a few stars still twinkled overhead.

'Here at our feet you see the great Lake Lendrim, from which arises the mightiest river of western lands, Tarrabelner—you see her there, curving away before us, winding west to the far-off Great Sea, beyond mortal sight. There on her northern banks lie the Middle Lands, and many realms of men. To your right, looking north, beyond the hills at the

mountains' feet, lies Shand.'

Arime peered eagerly in the direction Tarazion was pointing, but could see nothing but hill after rolling hill, fading into a dim distance. It seemed unlike the maps he had been studying. As he looked, the first rays of the sun struck the far west, and all the horizon blazed into new colour. Shand, and the lands about it, seemed to glow with a golden light. He had never before looked on lands so wide—all he had known was the narrow land of Tara between the mountains and the sea. Now the great wild lands between Tara and Shand stretched out before him. For a moment, he missed the sea's shifting blue and green, but then he looked down into the depths of Lendrim, still shadowed, and saw the sky reflected there, deeper than deep. He breathed, and his eyes shone.

They rode down the narrow path, losing the view as they descended again into forests and gorges of stone. Ever the sound of running water pursued them, but they had heard no sound of living folk, nor had they seen anyone in the lonely mountain pass. Still Tarazion hurried, only letting them rest briefly before moving on even as the sun began to sink to the west.

In this way they came through the mountain country and to the plains beyond. Arime had caught only a brief glimpse of the secret shores of Lendrim through trees as they rode by in the evening, and only heard from a distance the mighty roar of the falls which were said to be the greatest in the world, the birthplace of the river Tarrabelner. He vowed to travel this way again, if he ever did come to the Throne.

But that set his mind thinking of things too large and

weighty for him, so he put his head down and rode on, always following the horse ahead.

The lords accompanying him spoke little. He sensed a sorrow and anxiety about them. They were after all leaving their homes to the mercy of Syra and the Reavers, Arime thought. He felt helpless and lost. After a while he began to feel sullen again, and cursed the fate that had dragged him away from his peaceful life into these affairs. At one stage he even wondered whether Tarazion was telling him the truth, and whether he had not in fact been kidnapped as part of a plot: he suddenly had the urge to run to his sister for safety—but he remembered the tears he had seen in the man's eye, and the dark images of the mirror, and dismissed that idea, and rode on.

They were now riding through a rolling green country, with few trees. The mountains were behind them; before them lay a smooth green horizon. Each night, as they rode, stars in their countless thousands lit their way, helped on occasion by a silver moon which seemed larger and brighter to Arime's eyes. Then, after a long time, the light would grow golden and the sun would leap above the Mountains of Morning and all the land around them would come to life—birds would sing in the air, and the grey downs would shine green. Then they would make camp and try and sleep. In this way they made swift progress over the lands between the Lake and the Wood, and after three days down from the mountains they came to a steep rise and could look further ahead to the west and north.

Tarazion pointed, and the lords nodded. On the horizon loomed a great shadow of trees which blocked their path.

Arime felt suddenly full of awe and fear, and he knew without asking that these were the first outlying trees of the Wood of Seven, the Haunted Wood. So this had been the way his mother had come! He trembled. Yet, with his fear, he felt a wonder and a great curiosity, and his heart leapt within him. Tarazion watched him, and spoke:

‘Aye, lad, therein lie many mysteries, and many paths wind among the trees. There was your mother born, and there she came at the end, indeed by this very road. One day—not yet—you too may ride under those leaves. And may you once more come into the light! Things both good and evil, and things neither good nor evil, dwell therein—but our way at present lies to the west of the Wood, along the road to Restonia.’

And they rode on, by daylight now, coming no closer to that strange forest, but skirting it along a track that seemed almost faded into the grass, heading now almost due west.

Two more days brought them to the ford of a swift river in a green, tree-filled valley. They crossed this without difficulty. As they rode up the western bank, Tarazion looked at Arime and smiled.

‘Like as not this makes little difference to you, prince,’ he said, ‘but to a traveller weary of this world’s ways who has laboured long this is a moment long awaited. For in crossing that river you have entered the fields of Shand, and you will soon come to the kingdoms at the heart of the realm of old.’

Arime looked about him. The downs had broken up into low river meadows, and everywhere lush trees grew and a myriad birds sang, but he felt nothing, and said nothing.

They veered north again then, and, following a great and

broad river on their left, rode up a narrow land between it and the rising downs on their right. Arime saw the first signs of other folk: walled fields, cleared glades, but all was silent and deserted except for the occasional rising smoke of a distant fire. On a hill ahead of them stone towers arose—the fortress of the Lord Reskille of Restonia, Tarazion explained, southern bastion of Shand.

‘Say nothing as yet of the things we have discussed,’ Tarazion said to him as they approached the forbidding grey walls, ‘for this is a cautious land, but lately at war. I shall speak for us all.’

Tarazion spoke then to a sentry who looked on them all with grim astonishment, and they were admitted to the castle without difficulty. Arime felt his heart close in on him as he rode under that stone gate, and he wondered what way his life would turn now. He was only too willing to keep silent—indeed, he wished that Tarazion would not only speak for him but take the weight of this new life from him altogether. He wanted nothing of kings, or swords, or wars. He thought of Syra and wondered if she was safe, and he shivered as he recalled again his vision of her and of the grey web she had woven in Tara. But he found it hard to picture her face. He wondered then if he would ever see her again. But there was now too much pain and anguish in his life, and he closed off his heart to it all.

In a short time, Arime was brought through Restonia and before King Helca IV—a man with a silver beard and a thin silver crown, who looked upon him with strange eyes. He said nothing, and Arime did not speak. He was given his own room, comfortable enough, looking west and south

across the pleasant lands they had ridden through on their way north to the heart of Restonia. Arime now paid little attention to these matters. He wanted nothing but peace, and to be left to himself, and when he was alone, his mind now turned always to his mother—he wondered about her, and whether Helca had indeed known her as he had said he did, and what those silent lords around him knew of her, or guessed of him. In all the dim grey corridors of this castle he had no friends, he felt—for he no longer could feel open or trusting towards anyone: Barragath and Tarazion he hardly saw and did not know whether to trust or not, so low had his spirits sunk.

Shand in the autumn seemed to him a dreary place—for, with the end of the summer, it had begun to rain long and hard. Arime would look out from his window onto grey skies and swimming pavestones, and dim fields in the distance. Fog hid the horizon. For much of the time he wept, alone. He wished he was at home again in the High Houses, above the fogs and rain. Even the companionship of Syra he would have welcomed.

Several weeks went by in this fashion. He was given servants, and was well-fed, and the King visited him, but these things made little difference to his mood. Helca did little but stare at him, which made him feel uncomfortable, and the servants were too busy to become his friends. Tarazion had, it seemed, gone away, bidding him farewell and even embracing him, which he had never done before—but rather than comfort him, this had upset him, and he had wept like a child for a long time when the door had closed behind the one-eyed man. Barragath, he knew now, had

dwelt in Restonia before, and for him this was a homecoming of sorts, but Arime did not seek him out. He began to imagine what Ryna would have done and felt in this lonely place. The castle seemed haunted by her.

There came a morning not long after his arrival when winter was beginning in earnest: a frost in the night had frozen over the bowl of water at his bedside and locked the shutters with an icy grip. Trees hung with dripping icicles, and the pavestones of the castle reflected the white and grey sky. A pale mist lurked in the shallow valleys and about the river in the distance. The sun would not be seen that day, Arime thought, as he prised open the shutters with a crack. Cold came into the room like a ghost, and he shivered. From his window, he could not only look out from the walls but also see into the courtyard to his left. Someone was moving in the shadows of the Cloisters, as they called the sheltered passage from the Hall to the western wing —or rather, someone was standing there, unmoving. He peered down: it seemed to be a young man, much the same age as himself, but he was holding something at arm's length. Arime shivered again in the still air.

Curiosity bested him. Dressing quickly and pulling over his clothes a thick cloak, he descended to the courtyard and approached the figure from the rear. The youth appeared to be holding a sword out from himself, straining to keep it held. He could hear the effort in the breathing. Then the blade fell and he collapsed onto the ground with a moan. Arime rushed forward but stopped himself within a few feet. The face looked up at him. They both gasped: one in surprise at being discovered, Arime because the face he was looking

into was that of a young woman.

She was about his age, with red-blond hair like a stilled fire. Her face was pale, and she looked at first fearful, and then resentful.

‘What do you want?’ she snapped.

‘I...I saw you from my window,’ said Arime.

‘Go away,’ she said, rubbing her arm and sitting up, but Arime did not move. He had seen her before, around the castle, but, having closed off his heart from others he had not asked about her. She was, he thought, the daughter of Helca the king, but he was not certain.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

She did not answer at first.

‘You’re the one from the East, aren’t you? The one they call “Prince”? The one who has my room?’ she said, standing up and sheathing the old sword that she had been holding.

‘What were you doing?’ asked Arime.

‘Nothing that you would understand,’ she said. ‘My name is Lonia. Princess Lonia to you,’ she said, curtseying in a mocking fashion. ‘I am the daughter of the King.’

‘I am Arime,’ he said, bowing a little, ‘of Tara, over the mountains. My mother was Ryna, Warden of Tara.’

‘Your mother was Ryna?’ said the girl, her eyes widening, her feet stepping closer to him before she could stop them. ‘Ryna who captured the Giant of Tarthos? Ryna who rode away with the Crimson Company to great deeds in the Middle Lands?’

Arime nodded and bowed a little again. Perhaps this girl knew something of his mother?

‘That is so,’ he said, stiffly. ‘What of it?’

‘What do you know of her?’ she asked.

Arime saw no reason why he should answer her, but found himself speaking nonetheless. A great thirst for companionship sprang up in him.

‘I...She left. She left Tara before I was very old,’ he said.

Lonia held out the sword that she carried to him.

‘Look,’ she said, gently. ‘This is the sword of old King Helca —not my father, but the first of that name. It stands usually by the great hearth in the Hall. It’s said that he could hold it at arm’s length for a day, he was so strong. But most try now to hold it for an hour. It’s said that Ryna held it for three, even when she was my age.’

Arime felt the weight of the sword. It was not easy to hold, even with both hands.

‘What else do you know of my mother?’ he asked, as effortlessly as he could. She looked at him quickly.

‘I could tell you the tales that I know,’ she said, kindly, ‘but they are not much. My father keeps a book, high in a tower of the keep, and he has scribes record all the tales that he hears from Restonia and other lands. It’s said that therein are written also the tales of the beginning of the world. But I cannot read it yet. He had all the stories of Ryna written there. He knew her, and loved her, I think —he’s sometimes talked of her to me.’

Arime handed the sword back to her.

‘I’m sorry that I have your room,’ he said. ‘I did not know. I did learn to read a little in Tara. Perhaps if you show me this book, I can read some of its tales to you. Tarazion taught me my letters.’

‘Tarazion?’ gasped Lonia. ‘You are full of wonders! A

prince, born of Ryna, and taught by the Sorcerer himself!

‘He’s not a sorcerer,’ said Arime. ‘And neither am I a prince. I am just Arime.’

He had not meant to say that. But he wanted this girl’s friendship, he wanted to talk to her about his mother; and he wanted to read about Ryna if he could.

Lonia looked on him kindly.

‘And I am not a true princess, not in my heart,’ she said. ‘The burden of blood weighs us both down, it seems. Come! You shall be my guest in this kingdom!’

She led him away to the first meal of the grey dawn.

In this way, Lonía became Arime’s first friend in Restonia. In time their hearts warmed to each other—for she, being the daughter of the King, had also found herself shunned by other children, partly because of their shyness and resentment, partly because she had cultivated her pride in order to combat their sharp and sometimes cruel remarks, Arime felt. But in Arime she had found someone who not only fascinated her, who was not only Ryna’s son, but who was also called a prince. She felt that she could speak to him as an equal. A great friendship grew between them. After only a short while, Lonía admitted that she had been trying to emulate Ryna’s deed with Helca’s Sword that frosty morning when they had first met, and Arime understood. He began—only very slightly at first—to see how his mother must have felt in that place: a restless spirit, a woman, yearning to do great things but bound by the life into which she had been born. And as time went on, he came to see that both he and Lonía felt much the same.

Time passed by, and things moved in the world at large: Arime learned from Helca that Tara had indeed been overrun by the Reavers and was used by them, with Syra giving them freedom in the realm. The land groaned for release, but no help was forthcoming, for all the western lands now began to suffer before the onslaught of the hosts from the Dark Isles and Turgal. Great armies marched unhindered through the Pass of the South and harried the Middle Lands until, one by one, that spring and summer, the small kingdoms fell and became fiefs of the distant Emperor, ruled with the aid of the Dark Circle, the Morndred, in Gon-rinin's name.

Helca the King had admitted Arime into his councils with the lords of the realm and the exiled lords of Tara. Tarazion came there sometimes from his journeys in secret over the mountains where he gathered news. There Arime also learned of the re-arming of Restonia, of the mustering of arms, of the growing skirmishes along the border, and of the gathering shadow in the hearts of men. And he saw that his vision of his sister's evil had been right, and he felt chilled to the core.

But he learned much else beside: for, as Lonia had said, high in the highest tower of the castle, Helca kept a book, in a room bright with sunlight and the flickering light of many candles. wherein an old man with a shaky hand and a great quill pen, larger than any Arime had seen, wrote down tales told by minstrels and messengers, not only of these events but also of times long ago. Arime was permitted to look in it—and though much of what was written there was too faded to be read, or written in signs he had not learned, much was also clear to him.

He read there of things which enchanted him wholly, taking his mind and eyes far from the fields of Shand and even from his memories of Tara and his mother: he read of the Beginning of the World, of the Dream of Raendu, of the Breaking of the Staff of Life, of the rise and fall of realms, and of the coming of the Dragons. These held him spellbound in the tower as days and nights went by overhead —often he would forget to eat or sleep, and would emerge exhausted from the moonlit chamber, weak and hungry, but with his eyes shining. The tales were in no particular order in the great leather-bound volume of tiny script —tales of the recent past were mixed with distant legends and poems from antiquity; nor was the book an original, as the scribe told him —it was largely copied, piece by piece, by unknown hands long ago in the history of Restonia from another source, the enchanted Book of Seven, which was kept in a secret place far away, no one living knew for certain where. And it was added to with legends and news and tales of Restonia alone. But, copy though it might be, it was enough.

There he read of some of the exploits of Ryna, his mother, as the minstrels had told them. At first he read avidly, poring over each word and page carefully, as though seeking for something that might escape him —but after a while he saw that whatever it was he sought he would not find in the pages of that book. Some of the stories he had already heard; others were completely new to him; none told him what he wanted to hear. He did know what that was, only that it was not there.

Lonia would try to comfort him, but he would not be comforted —and she, hardly knowing what it was that

seemed to gnaw at him, could do little but draw him out into the fields and fresh air. There they honed together their skills of the bow and sword, and Lonia, following her idol Ryna, became as skilled as the women-warriors of Valadria with the sword, but more especially with the bow. Barragath taught them both the rest of what he knew, and they spent long days together hunting in the woods, and fishing on the river —and Arime visited the Falls of Tarthos where his mother had, so the book said, bested the Giant. But the water's roar did not tell him what he wanted to know either, and he returned saddened to the castle.

In this way, Arime approached his nineteenth year, and he came to regard Restonia as his home. His memories of Tara had become dim: he would sometimes dream of Syra's face, or the sea, but for the most part he lived a good life, if an earnest one, in Helca's Castle. Restonia was still largely a protected land: to the south the vigilance of the Lords Reskille and the fear of the Wood of Seven kept many foes at bay, while the rivers to the west, and the mighty Lords of the South Vale, who fought many battles on their own borders and drove back any encroachment there, protected the kingdom. In the north, Valadria hurled back growing forces of Shadowed Men coming across the Plain of Hethrian from northern Tara around the Mountains of Morning, and though many bloody battles were fought there, no enemy came to Restonia from that direction. The months slipped by —but it was a false peace, and the Lords of Restonia, and the exiles of Tara, knew it.

One day in the waning Autumn, a year after Arime had come to Restonia, as the leaves turned the colour of blood

and spilled on the stones and into the corners of the castle, Arime sat on the battlements looking south. He had been reading all day in the book, it being too cold to go riding that day, and he had come to a faded page wherein was told Visaeon's tale of the coming of Ryna to Helca's Castle. He had not been able to make out all the words. His mind was stuck on it like paste; he could not shake off the images that it had painted so imperfectly for him. He had tried to ask the King, sure that he would know more, but Helca was busy now, and he did not see any except the lords of Restonia now save in some dire need. Arime's needs were not those of the realm, he knew, and he did not go into the King's chambers.

Lonia came to sit by him. She had learned his moods, and had discovered long ago that he liked to be alone when reading the book, and so she had not seen him all day. But she sensed his brooding, and touched him on the shoulder. He turned to her.

'I read of my mother again today,' he said. She nodded. 'Oh Lon! What is it that eats at my heart? It is as though I look for some message in those pages from her own hand! And I could not make out the letters.'

'What did the tale speak of?' she asked quietly.

'Of her coming to Helca's Castle.'

'I know that tale,' she said. He looked at her. 'My father told it to me long ago. I remember it. It filled me with a wonder.'

She told him then all she knew of Visaeon's encounter with the Wanderer from the Wood of Seven and of his words, and the handing over of the child. Her tale filled some of the gaps left by the book, but not all of them. Arime looked south

across the fields to the distant woods.

‘Why did you not speak of this before to me?’ he asked her after a while.

‘You are her son,’ Lonia replied. ‘It has been difficult to know when to speak of her and when to remain silent. And I thought you knew this tale.’

He nodded and pressed her hand.

‘The Wood of Seven,’ he said, half to himself. ‘It seems to come into many tales. What do you know of it?’

‘No more than you. It is a dark place, but not an altogether evil one. It is said that the Seven Spirits came there at the beginning of the World. But many other things came there after. No one goes there now. It is haunted, they say.’

‘Aye, but by whom? My mother’s ghost, it seems, amongst others, perhaps.’

Seeing the light in his eye, Lonia suddenly said, ‘Do not go there, Arime! It is a place of dread! I would not have...’

She stopped, looking at the stones at her feet.

‘You would not have what? Not have me free of this shadow that sucks my blood and confounds my thought? I must know, Lonia, I must find out...I know not what! But the answer seems to lie therein. My mother thought so.’ He stood up as he spoke, and paced back and forth.

‘That was not what I was going to say,’ Lonia said quietly, but Arime was not listening.

‘The Wood of Seven, the Wood of Seven,’ he said to himself, ignoring her. ‘What lies within your haunted valleys, I wonder?’

‘Arime, please,’ Lonia said, ‘promise me. You have read the tale of Valkurn and of his enchantment there. For my

sake, say you will not go there —I fear evil will come of it.'

'May we be struck down if I break this promise to you: I will not go without your grace, princess,' he said suddenly and knelt by her, seeing her upset.

But Arime became restless all that week. He stopped reading the book, and was to be found instead peering from the battlements towards the south, where the distant wood could be imagined on the horizon.

One night he lay in bed sleeplessly, and half-dreamt that he hated his mother for darkening his life in this way, blaming her for the shadow over Syra too. He jumped out of the bed and went to the window. Southwards lay the shadows of the autumn evening, dark against a dark sky. He clenched his fist. The Wood seemed to call to him, a call stronger than his promise, he thought. Quickly and quietly he got up, quickly collecting food and what coins he had, and preparing his horse.

As he rode from the gate, telling the sentry some tale of a late errand for the King, he wondered what Tarazion would say. The one-eyed man had visited him often in the early days after his arrival in Restonia, and Arime had forgiven him for his abduction from his home. But then he had come less often, staying only briefly, leaving many unanswered questions in Arime's mind. Did he still keep watch over Syra? Was that why he returned so often in secret to Tara? What had his promise to Ryna been, and why had he made it?

It had been many months now since Tarazion had been seen in Restonia, at least as far as Arime knew —but then he put the thought of him from his mind, knowing that his tutor

would only have spoken against this deed he now did. And Arime remembered how Tarazion had kept secrets from him, and he summoned up his mistrust of him, and spurred his horse on.

It was the middle of a dark night. Stars were hidden by thick clouds, and there was no moon. The air was very cold, and his horse's breath blew a mist in front of him which streamed past him in the quiet darkness. No sound but the sound of his own horse could be heard; and he met no one on the open road south.

Southern Restonia, though not yet breached, was however now a place of growing peril—for many dark things dwelt in its sparsely populated woods and hills: and as the dark hosts filled the Middle Lands many more came, driven out of their own shadowy corners, or awakened by the trammel of armoured feet on roads that had been silent. No army passed the watchful strength of Reskille, but many were the beasts who did not use the roads of men and came by night, and many were the creatures like beasts, who used night as a cloak, and, coming by secret paths and byways, crept into the kingdom to spread an unseen terror in the hearts of those who dwelt there. And there were a few who had never been driven out, but dwelt there still, deep in the depths of the forest or in secret caves in the foothills of the mountains, waiting for their day.

Arime knew of these dangers: he had hunted wolves in the winter, and found them to be fell-hearted and savage; he had seen shadows moving in the woods, on the edge of sight, things not beasts but not human either; he had heard many other tales of growing terror. And then he had always been

with others, never alone —but, being alone now, he put all these things from his mind. He was riding to the Wood of Seven, where his mother had been born, and into which she had passed at her life's end, and it was her or some knowledge of her that he sought, and through that some knowledge of himself —and all else would have to stand aside from that quest.

He rode on quickly, wanting to be well away from the castle by dawn, but the light began to grow before very long and he looked around him at a wooded country, rolling and well-watered, green and red and brown as the sun rose. He stopped at a village on the way, ate a swift meal, and was gone, barely giving his horse time to rest. He knew that he would be pursued when his absence was discovered, but he hoped to gain enough ground to reach the Wood first.

He neither saw nor heard the rider who came some distance behind him, shadowing his movements carefully.

Later that day he rode further south than he had yet ridden since his arrival in Restonia. As the sun sank he was forced to rest his horse and sleep himself, and he did so in a small copse to the left of the road, where a little-used path veered east in the direction of the Wood. After a brief, shallow sleep he mounted again, and rode on while it was still night. Soon, at a lonely farm, he persuaded the sleepy farmer to exchange his steed, and what little gold he had brought, for another —but the farmer, seeing which way Arime was going to ride, became afraid and spoke sternly against it. Arime, though, from passion and lack of sleep, had become fey, and laughed, and rode on into the night down the tree-shrouded road that led to the Haunted Wood.

The farmer locked and bolted his doors and windows, being not too sure that he had not just dealt with a phantom from that very place. When another rider, hooded and cloaked, swept by without stopping a little time afterwards, the farmer took down his axe from the wall—but he heard no more that night.

It was on the evening of his second day from Helca's Castle that Arime had his first glimpse of the Wood. It rose suddenly before him, where he had thought there had been only clear hillside—a wall of trees of all kinds, silent, tall, an army of ghosts, waiting. The failing sun struck them red with its last rays, and the hillside leading steeply up to them was deep golden and looked strange against the purple sky. His horse shied, exhausted and unwilling to go on. He dismounted and walked up to the threshold of the forest, leading the beast. Within the gloom nothing moved. Cold air rose from the grass. Clouds parted and a few stars peeped out.

Arime's fey mood turned cold. He looked about him. He was miles from any living folk, he thought. Perhaps he would meet his mother, but she would be only a spectre, pale as mist and hideous. He began to tremble, and pulled his cloak closer about him.

Just then a fleeting shadow, lithe and close to the ground, moved across the edge of his sight. His horse reared, tearing free from his grasp, and bolted. He looked—it was a wolf, or something in wolf's shape, slinking across the grass behind him. He turned and placed his back to the first of the trees, drawing his sword. He saw its white eyes and heard its low snarl. But it saw his sword, and it came no nearer. The horse

galloped over the ridge to the north and was gone. Arime slowly backed into the forest, but as he went, his feet crunching on dead leaves, the wolf disappeared, and he panicked, running on into the depths of the forest, aimless and terrified.

After a few moments he recovered some of his courage and sheathed his sword. The wolf had gone. The Wood was dark and quiet, except for the thickness of dry leaves under his feet. In the dimness he could see nothing but the faint images of trees all around him. Somehow he felt safer within them than he had felt at their edge. He walked slowly on.

He had no clear idea of his path, even were he to find one in that trackless place. His main thought had been to get to the Wood —now that he was here, his mind was cooled and he began to wonder at his own foolhardiness, but he kept walking: south, he thought, more or less, into the night. Soon he felt weary, but he dared not rest. Though all the darkness was still and silent, his heart beat quickly and his every sense was sharp. It was thus that he noticed the peculiar echo — whenever he paused, he heard other footsteps, more distant, walk a pace or two, then pause also. This went on, he thought, for about an hour. Once he stopped for a long while, wondering if he were being followed, but he heard nothing, not even the hooting of an owl or the movement of some night-creature in the leaves. If this forest were inhabited, he thought, then its denizens either slept by night or watched him with an unnatural patience. He walked on.

Somewhere here, he thought, was his mother's grave. He thought of waiting for the dawn, but the darkness of the trees beckoned him, and he could not rest. Somewhere here was

an answer, an answer from her to the question he had had all his life, though he knew not what that was, even now. His feet dragged in the leaves, like the echoing feet behind him. Suddenly, he tripped and fell, crying out. He tumbled down the shallow valley before him and splashed into the pond at the bottom. He stumbled to his feet and heard a low growl: the wolf was at his side, five paces away.

He fumbled for his sword, but the creature pounced, snarling. Arime fell backwards, yelling. Then he heard a sharp sound and the beast fell off him with a yelp, rolled over in a spasm, and fell dead into the water.

Arime sat up, breathing hard. He could see nothing in the darkness, and was not sure that the wolf was unmoving. He waited, frozen. A slow light grew. Grey beams shone pale onto the forest floor—whether it was the sun, cloaked by the canopy of ancient, unfalling leaves, or a strong moonlight, he could not tell. Gradually shapes became clearer in the night. The wolf indeed lay still in the pond—and what looked like an arrow stuck from its throat.

He looked around him quickly, standing and drawing his sword.

‘Ho there!’ he cried. ‘I am a stranger in this forest! I thank you for your archery, but I would that you show yourself to me!’

Only silence met his cry. Trees, some tall, some short, of all kinds, stood all around, lit by the dim light. He felt it to be morning, but he was so hungry and tired that he was not sure of anything.

Hearing and seeing nothing, he slowly climbed out of the southernmost side of the dell, and walked carefully on. He

had no idea how many miles he had walked, or where in the forest he was. He ate hurriedly of the scraps of food he had brought, preserving some, but he began to feel that unless he came to more food and some place of rest soon, he would perish there, and he began to regret his foolishness again.

As what he imagined was day outside grew to noon, he came to a more open area where here and there a glade let the full sunlight shine in. A few birds sang, far off —the first living things he had met there apart from the wolf. His heart lightened a little, but he did not re-sheath his sword. The sense that he was being followed and closely watched did not leave him, but he dared not cry out again. At last, overcome with weariness, he sat down by the roots of a great oak and went into sleep, despite all his efforts to remain alert.

He was awakened by a cry. A shout came again —a voice he almost remembered. He leapt to his feet, cursing himself, but thankful that his sword was still in his hand. The light had faded and the warm sunlight, which had been like a meal to his tired and cold bones, had gone. A distant rustling drew his attention westward —or what he thought was west, for in every direction the forest looked the same. He ran after it.

As he ran he heard his name: 'Arime!' It was cried out —a cry for help, from a young voice. He could tell no more, and did not wish to cry out himself. Lunging through lashing branches he followed it, slowly descending into a green dell, twilight-dim. All fell silent. He waited, breathing hard, his hand so tight on his sword that it hurt him.

'Where are you?' he cried out at last. No answer came.

Then, on the very edge of sight, almost invisible in the

fading light, a shape moved —a white shape, like a man perhaps. Then it was gone. Arime froze. Was it a spectre, an evil spirit of the Wood? Had he been drawn further in by enchantment? He shivered uncontrollably.

Deep in trees ahead of him, something was moving, coming towards him. It was not the white shape he had seen a moment ago. It was someone he knew, someone calling to him in pain and fear. He ran forward.

Lonía collapsed in his arms.

'He spoke,' she said as he laid her on a soft pile of leaves, as gently as he could, 'he spoke and said his name.'

She was clawed on her back and shoulders, but it was her left leg which had bled the most. Arime tore at his tunic and bound it as best he could. Lonía drifted in and out of consciousness. He cradled her in his arms. The wood was dark.

'Wunderalga,' Lonía whispered. 'That was his name. A Carthog.'

He thought her delirious, and, feeling her brow, sensed a temperature there. He knew they needed to find some kind of shelter for the night, but there was nothing to see but dim trees in every direction. Why had she followed him? Now they were both in greater peril.

Lonía was suddenly awake.

'Arime!' she said, breathlessly.

He did not wish to alarm her, and said nothing of his thoughts, but she went on.

'Arime,' she said, 'there is a Carthog in the woods. It is a creature of the Morndred, a dark one, a Shadowed Man. But it spoke! It said its name.'

‘Lonia, oh Lonion! Shadowed Men do not speak! But why did you follow me? I see now how the wolf was slain —by your skill with the bow. But we must find shelter somewhere, and food,’ said Arime. Her words had chilled him, but he forced himself to think clearly. Even so, the sense that strange eyes watched him as he held Lonion close to him grew as the night came on.

Beneath the branches on the edge of the dell crouched a grim, pale creature, looking down upon them in an anguish of heart which he could not bear. There, in the arms of this young prince with the face like the one he remembered, lay a beauty like the one that he had so long desired: he would not, could not, permit it! And yet, as he looked down at them, his eyes full of tears and his claws clenched so tight that his long nails bit into his hands, a deep memory was stirred, deeper than life or the darkness in which he had lived, and he wondered, and he paused, and he could not take vengeance.

Quietly, he turned away and went into the wood.

FROM THE CRYPT OF THE CARTHOG

Those men who were of dark heart followed Aradu, and he promised them light but made their hearts darker, until not even the memory of light reached them, and they were called Shadowed Men, and spoke not.

-from The Book of Seven

Arime had no choice but to remain where he was with Lonia throughout the night—he had little food left, and knew of no shelter, and dared not move Lonia lest he open her wounds again. So he lay there, trying to warm her, occasionally fainting himself, and shivering in the night. The trees disappeared into blackness; sounds vanished into silence. He neither heard nor saw anything of the Carthog—for so he imagined was the pale man-shape he had seen far off—nor did any other creature come near them in the dark, as far as he could tell. But when the faint day came again, Arime ached and felt weak, and Lonia’s breathing was shallow and pained. He knew that he had to risk moving on, but to where?

Using a tree behind him for support, he clambered to his feet and sheathed his sword. He took off his cloak and laid Lonia on it, and bit by bit dragged her to the most sheltered corner of the dell. There, he found a little stream and also a few late berries. He drank and ate, and made Lonia do the same. They also ate what remained of Arime’s food, and some strength returned to them with it. Feeling a little

revived, Arime moved on, following the little stream as it made its way across and down the forest floor as it gently angled into a broad valley. They soon came out into an open glade. The sunlight warmed them, and Lonia awoke, but she laughed deliriously at the white clouds they watched moving overhead, and Arime knew he had to find proper food and shelter for her that day, or she would perish. They went on.

He covered many weary miles in this way, dragging Lonia across the leaf-deep forest floor, stopping at streams and finding mouthfuls of secret berries or sweet nuts that had been hoarded by squirrels or other creatures—but they met no living thing, except only an occasional bird, a distant robin or starling, in the green and grey branches. Out of the wind it was warmer than it had been on the plain, but Arime knew that he was weak and had no strength for another night like the last.

As evening drew on, they came to a small, steep valley, down which the stream they followed plummeted into a gorge. Though he tried to lower her gently down the slope, Arime slipped and lost his grip of the cloak on which Lonia lay, and they both rolled painfully to the rocky floor at the bottom. Lonia groaned. He quickly checked her wounds. Her thigh was bleeding again. Tearing at his cloak, he bound it properly, then sought desperately around for anything that could help him. He gasped.

A rock face stood just behind him. In it was a door, five feet high, also made of stone, it seemed. Strange, ancient letters, something like the letters in the old book but older, were written on the outside of it. It was partly open.

Hardly daring to breathe, Arime crept close and peered in.

In the grey gloom of the dusk he could see nothing, nor could he hear anything inside. Lonia moaned in pain. Drawing his sword, Arime thrust at the door and went in.

A rough-hewn stone chamber opened out in the half-light. He saw torches, unlit, in wall-brackets. Using his sword blade until it was chipped and broken at the tip, he sparked one of these into life and lit the others. Then he dragged Lonia gently in, and lit a fire in the central pit. The blazing light shone on a space fifty paces square with a low ceiling. Straw lay strewn in a corner; firewood in another; bags and bottles and other dim shapes lay stacked at the back. Though it was clear that the cave was still used, though ill-kept, Arime was desperate, and he searched the bags and bottles. Several contained what seemed to be wine; some of the bags held dried meat or wheaten cakes, very old but still edible. Arime ate quite a lot of it hungrily and fed scraps to the half-conscious Lonia. She stirred. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes—but from the fear in them, Arime saw that she was still in fever and did not recognise him. He wrapped her warmly in his cloak and her own, and set her near the fire to sleep. Then he watched till morning with drawn sword, facing the door.

Morning came slowly. He watched the light creep through the door. Nothing else had he seen or heard, except for the crackling of the life-saving fire at his back. With the new day, Lonia also recovered, and called to him.

‘You should not have come,’ he said, cradling her head and stroking her red-gold hair. ‘Why did you follow me?’

‘Can you not guess, prince?’ she said weakly, looking up at him. Even in the weak light of dawn, the firelight had

begun to pale, and the chamber was filled with a grey-gold dimness.

Arime looked away.

'How is your wound?' he asked.

Lonia tried to move.

'I will live —but it may be many days before I can walk freely,' she said with a groan. She paused, looking around at the cave.

'Where are we? And what of the Carthog?' she asked, gripping him tightly.

'In a chamber of good fortune —and I have neither seen nor heard the Carthog since he left you. What happened with him? In your fever you said he spoke.'

'He came upon me as I watched you,' Lonía said, her eyes looking into the distance of her own thought. 'I fought, but he was far stronger than me.'

'Yet you escaped.'

'He let me go, Arime. He let me go. He spoke to me, and let me go. I did not dream that in a fever —it was real enough,' she said, trembling.

'But Shadowed Men do not speak.'

Lonia nodded.

'So the old tales tell. Yet this one did. It —he— said his name.'

'Yes —you spoke it. Wunderalga, you said.'

'I shall never forget it. And he was ready to tear my throat —but he looked, and said "My name is Wunderalga" —and then he threw me aside and went.'

'This is one mystery among many in this bewitched wood. I was wrong to come here —foolish, perhaps enchanted. I felt

I had to come. But this wood smells of death and evil. And I broke my oath to you.'

'Yes,' said Lonia, 'and we have both been struck down, it seems, as your oath promised. But not all here is evil. Have you not felt the sunlight here? And listened to the trees? Great power is in this place, for good as well as ill.'

Arime looked at her.

'Lonia, we must move from here,' he said. 'This cave is still used by some creature, I know not what, nor do I know why it did not return to its home in the night. I came here out of desperation, but we cannot stay here. We must go on. Are you strong enough?'

'No, but you are right. We must move. Let us eat what remains of the food and go.'

She tried to stand but cried out in pain and collapsed. Arime caught her. As they fell together, he stumbled back into the rear of the cave where the light had not yet reached.

The firelight here flickered on treasure: coins spilled on the floor, golden and silver. Bags, old and split, spilled gems and more coins in small piles amidst them. Old swords and an axe were propped against the walls, along with pieces of armour, now tarnished and faded, covered with dust. Coloured cloaks, rich with fur, brown and white, lay scattered on the ground. Other articles of various shapes and sizes cluttered the cave—but bones, many of them recognisably human, were spread throughout the treasure, white and frail with age. Arime wondered in a flash if his mother's bones lay among them—but he remembered Tarazion's words, that he had spoken to her at the last, and he put the idea from his mind.

Nevertheless, they felt ill and trembled at the sight, and Lonia, who stood leaning on the cave wall, fell backwards.

'It's a crypt,' she whispered. 'A Carthog's crypt!'

'Your fever is returning,' he said. 'Let us leave this evil place!'

'Wait!' she said, and she crawled forward again to where something gleaming had caught her eye. Reaching up she lifted out from where they had hung from the wall three things: a small hand-mirror, with a clear silver glass; a locket on a thin gold chain; and a signet ring.

'These things were made of a piece,' she said looking at them, 'made to go together. They are old, but look! Each one is clean as though newly polished. Out of all this treasure, some hand has nurtured these things. They were hanging on the wall, separate from the rest.'

'I know not whether to listen to you or whether it is the fever that speaks in you —but you are right in this. The mirror, the locket and the ring all shine bright as new. But the rest of this hoard lies dust-covered and dead. Perhaps these things are bewitched!'

'No,' Lonia said, looking at the articles closely. 'The workmanship is that of Shand, not witch-work.'

'But it is said that even the innocent can be enslaved to serve evil,' said Arime. There was something about the things Lonia held that troubled him, he did not know why. 'Let us go!' he said.

But Lonia had found a catch and opened the locket in her hand. She gasped.

'What is it?' he cried, and looked.

The locket lay, palm-size, in her hand. Within were two

very small but very detailed miniature portraits: the first was a woman, dark-haired and beautiful; but the second image was Arime's own.

The face was older, perhaps, but unmistakable. Lonia looked up into Arime's face, slowly.

'What devilry is this?' said Arime, in a low whisper, his eyes wide. 'Have we already been bewitched? Do we walk in a spell, or a dream?'

'No, no, Arime!' said Lonia, turning to comfort him. 'Do you not see? Think! This is not your face, but the image of one of your line. This could be the father of your father—or mother.'

His mind raced—he thought back to Tarazion's words when he had left Tara not long ago. How often had he pored over them in his mind, being too proud to ask the old man more: 'Your mother's mother was Alagar, Lady of Valadria. And your mother's father was Lord Lisaeon of Miria, who was the son of Ravena, who had come unlooked for from the Western Wood.'

'Then this is the face of Lisaeon—my grandfather,' he said aloud. Lonia nodded.

'I knew not the name, but saw that it must be so,' Lonia said. 'Did not the tale say that Ryna, your mother, came from this wood? How then was she born? It must have been in the wilderness of this place, even to these two whose locket we have found!'

'Then the woman is Alagar of Valadria,' he said. 'I wonder what fate has drawn me hither. I sought answers in this wood, and it seems I have found them. For I alone have found those things—I, who am their rightful bearer!'

'Not alone,' added Lonia, but Arime went to the door of the cave, almost swooning. He stood breathing in the air of the new day and said nothing for a long while. He was thinking again of Tarazion's words. It was true, then. He was the Heir to the High Throne. And his sister also. He should return to Helca's Castle at once. He came back to Lonia and looked at the other items.

'What then do these other things tell us?' he asked.

Lonia inspected the ring closely.

'It has an ancient letter inscribed in it,' she said, 'and this black stone must mean something.'

'Ravena!' cried Arime suddenly. 'It is her ring! It comes down Valkurn's line to my grandmother's hand.'

Lonia nodded, and looked at the mirror. 'I am reminded by this of the ancient tale of Kaela and Uneos, the only beautiful child of Aradu, God of Evil. Uneos came through the forests of the ancient world in its youth and was the first to look on the beauty of Kaela without her Mirror. And their love was very great,' she said, looking up at him. He returned her gaze and smiled.

'Lonia,' he said, 'these wonders are more than my spirit can carry alone. I am glad you are here, though we are in great peril.'

'I know it,' she said. 'Let us try and leave. We will be able to tell our way by the sun, while it is still light. These things are indeed marvellous, but this is, I fear, the den of Wunderalga, the Shadowed Man who speaks.'

'Do you think then that he slew my grand-parents long ago?' said Arime, helping her to stand.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'But I fear that it tormented him, if he

did —look at how he has preserved these things, alone, out of all these treasures, Arime —I don't know if it was fear or wisdom that made me think this when I first looked upon him, but I believe Wunderalga to be a creature in torment.'

'How so? All Shadowed Men lost their souls to Aradu and his evil son Gon-runin long ago at the beginning of things. They are wholly dark.'

'Perhaps —but can anything live and be wholly evil? And does even that mean that they do not feel their loss? Think of it —year after endless year of misery, without love or the hope of love, without friend, without kindness —only war, and blood, and cruelty, and darkness. How long must he have brooded over these things? Perhaps Alagar and Lisaean were the only lovers he had seen, or perhaps their love pierced even his shadowed heart. Perhaps they showed him some mercy, and he took pity. Oh, Arime, I do not know why I speak so, but I pity him, claw me as he did!'

'Then you are a greater soul than I,' said Arime, 'for, even though maybe I understand something of his pain in my own heart, I would slay him where he stood were I to see him again!'

Then Arime froze —for he had been standing with his back to the door of the cave, facing Lonia, and he saw the shadow pass across the wall of the chamber behind her, and saw the look of terror in her face as he spoke. He turned.

There, filling the door, was the huge bulk of the Carthog, his ragged form bent and old but frighteningly strong, his fangs, his claws, his terrible eyes. He stood there, barring their way. Arime's sword trembled in his hand.

'Go now,' said the creature in a rough and dark voice,

stepping heavily aside. 'I have heard thy words. They have bought thee both a moment of life. But by the noon hour I shall hunt thee with the Grey Wolves of the Moor, and we shall feed on thy flesh ere the day is done, for I am indeed Wunderalga, whom thy mother's father spared.'

He stood aside, and as they slipped by him from the cave, Arime saw tears stream from the Carthog's bestial face, and how his hands trembled.

Lonia could not run; Arime could not fight. Her leg was limp and useless, and his sword arm seemed numb. Together they somehow hobbled out of the valley and on into the wood. From the sun, they were heading south, but they limped and struggled aimlessly, in terror. After only a short while they both had to stop and collapse against a tree.

'I am cursed with weakness!' said Arime, breathlessly. 'I am craven not to fight that creature!'

'I saw it not so,' said Lonia, holding her leg and wincing. 'Could you not see the anguish in his face?'

'Anguish or not, he means to set the wolves on us, I'm certain of that! But we are too weak to run!'

'Nevertheless, run we must! And look —I have kept the treasures,' she said, and he saw that she carried the Ring, the Mirror and the Locket in her belt.

'Then even if he meant to spare us, he would seek us out now from rage, if these things are truly precious to him,' said Arime.

'Perhaps —but you only reclaim what is rightfully yours. Let us go!' she said, and tried to run —but before she had gone six paces she fell heavily into a drift of leaves and passed out. Arime bent to her.

‘Oh Lonia!’ he said quietly to himself. ‘Have I only discovered that I love you to meet death with you before I can proclaim it?’

Then, finding a new strength in his words, he picked her up and ran, carrying her, through the trees.

So he fled, powered by fear and love, but without hope — for the Wood stretched on endlessly before him. He leapt across streams, and climbed slopes, plunged down valleys and thrust his way through thorns and low branches, but ever the trees greeted him until he began to wonder if he had been tracing a broad circle, and was trapped forever in a spell. But he went on, and Lonia’s sleeping body grew heavier, and she lost blood as he ran, so that he knew the wolves would follow him easily wherever he went. He dared not stop, even after the sun had crossed the sky and he heard the distant howling of fell beasts behind him.

On he ran. The light in this part of the wood was stronger and he could at least see clearly where he was going. Suddenly he emerged into a meadow. A shallow river came out of the forest to his left, and wound away to his right. Dense trees loomed on the opposite bank. He turned and followed the river westwards, splashing along its marshy margins.

He fell several times, and Lonia cried out but did not fully stir. Again he picked her up and went on —but any hope that he had had of throwing the wolves off his trail was dashed when he looked back: coming into the clearing behind him he saw the Carthog, running like a deer, his long arms trailing, and with him came wolves, a dozen or more, faster than the wind.

Arime ran. His lungs and heart were ready to burst in fire when suddenly the river poured through a gap in the trees and he was out of the wood and looking westward across a grey plain. Weak winter sunlight shone palely on the rolling downs. No shelter there; he simply ran now, without hope, leaving the river and the forest.

But then he could run no more. Something gave way in his chest and he collapsed. He lay there, his breathing like the rush of rain on stone. He could hear them getting nearer and nearer across the plain.

Then Lonia was awake. She saw the wolves and wept.

'Raendu help us!' she cried, and Arime, stirring himself to one final act of defiance, flung the Mirror back at their pursuers. Then he passed out into darkness.

And so neither of them saw the curving arc that the Mirror made through the cold air, nor how its precious glass shattered as it hit the earth. Nor had they seen the Carthog's face as he had pursued them, weeping —hating, desiring. Nor could they have heard his muttered words to himself, cursing himself and his god, and begging that same god for mercy in the same anguished breath. For within his heart there raged a grim contest between savagery and love which was tearing him apart.

So it was that Wunderalga came upon the Mirror. And he paused in his hunt and looked therein: and he saw a face, broken and fragmented, twisted in evil, his own face; and he cried out such a cry that would have shattered the glass anew were it remade —and he plunged its fragments into his heart, seeing in his mind the image of the beauty he had

looked on long ago. His mighty fist drove the sharp glass deep, but he had died before the shards stopped his heart.

Blood flowed from him, and the wolves turned from their prey, ravenous with hunger, and fell upon his carcass, abandoning the chase.

So perished Wunderalga the Carthog —and his death was unwitnessed by any living thing save the beasts that consumed him.

But the appetite of the Wolves of the Grey Moors was not soon satiated in those days of death on the borders of Restonia, and soon the leaders of the pack, having finished with the body of the Carthog, were sniffing cautiously around the unconscious forms of Arime and Lonia as the dim and terrible day grew towards evening —but Arime was unaware of them, and his fevered mind was spinning with images of the Mirror of Alagar, and in his dreams he looked into the Mirror to see why all whom he loved fled from him, and he saw there a dreadful hooded face, dark and evil, staring back at him with his own eyes, and he cried out.

When at last he opened his eyes, he felt that the sky had either split and fallen about him or else become so heavy with cloud that it weighed down impossibly on him —for above him was a darkness lit from below with the light of flames. He lay there, unable to make sense of what he saw, for some time, wondering if he had died or was still in a dream. Then he heard a familiar voice, speaking to him across a great distance. He turned and was startled to see a great black raven standing in a small window at his side. It

looked keenly at him with one great eye, and he wondered if it had spoken, and whether he was lost in fever. But the voice spoke again, and it was not the raven's.

'Greetings, prince,' said the voice. He turned to look at the speaker.

'Tarazion!' he cried —for there the one-eyed man, his beard flecked with gold, dressed in travelling robes, sat by his side as he lay on a bed of straw. Arime had never been so glad to see anyone, he thought. But a sudden dread came into his mind.

'Where is Lonia?' he asked, trying to sit up, before a weariness like a death in his limbs forced him to swoon. He moaned.

'Steady, boy!' said Tarazion. 'Another hour or two and you'll be well enough to walk, perhaps. You've slept for a whole day and night. Lonia lies sleeping also under yonder coverlet. She is deeper under the fever than you are —but that also I may be able to help you with.'

Arime looked and saw that, across from him in a small shepherd's hut lay Lonia, breathing calmly and deeply.

'I am confused,' said Arime. 'I can only think of the wolves, and the burning pain in my chest as I ran. What happened then?'

'I was hoping that you would tell me of certain mysteries —both you and Lonia have spoken half in sleep, but much remains unclear. Certainly you have both taken in a fever, perhaps from strange food in the wild.'

'We were starving!' said Arime. 'We hadn't eaten enough for days.'

'Oft is the folly discovered built on the folly beneath,' said

the one-eyed man, 'and were you not still weak from your ordeal I might rebuke you for your actions these last few days. How is it that you were in the Wood of Seven at all, without leave or company? You do not realise how close you came to imperilling much more than you know! But tell me, if you are strong enough, of how all this came to be, and why the bones of a Carthog lay not many yards from you on the edge of the Wood and the Moors.'

Arime told as much as he could recall of the horrors of the wood, and of the final chase. The one-eyed man nodded.

'That explains the Ring of Ravena and the locket which I found with Lonia, and also her wounds, which were not those of a wolf. And now I can begin to piece together a much larger tale at last, I think,' he said. 'But where is Alagar's Mirror? And why did the wolves turn on your pursuer at the end? There lies a greater mystery: we may never know the whole tale of Wunderalga.'

'He spoke, and showed us some mercy. But I thought all the Carthogs came from the Evil Race, and were without pity or love — or speech?' said Arime.

'So you have been taught, and rightly enough — for if you were shown mercy by this one, strange forces were moving in its breast— but do not be so hasty to accept hard judgements: at the beginning, even the Evil Race were not so. It is hard for any living thing in Raendu's Dream to be wholly loveless.'

Arime shook his head and looked around. He felt dizzy.

'But how did I come here? And where is this place? And how did you find us?' asked Arime.

'You come here by your own foolishness,' said Tarazion,

frowning. 'Do you not yet see how close was your death? And yet,' he went on, his voice softening, 'perhaps I am not blameless in this, for leaving you for too long with too much unanswered in your heart. I am a flawed emissary, it seems—one more error such as this and all may be lost. But you live. And you have certainly shown much mettle, against odds that would have frozen the blood of lesser folk. Let us say again then, that it was good fortune which brought me in time to Helca's Castle, where I sought you, but found instead the alarm raised, and both you and Helca's daughter missing in the night. That was some nights ago.'

'But how did you know where to look for us?' interrupted Arime.

'While others sought for trails and clues outside, I wandered inside, seeking the subtleties which might betray your thoughts—for I guessed that you both had left of your own wills, and that one had followed the other. And so I came to the open book in the tower, which the scribe told me had recently entranced you: and I found it open to the pages wherein the old Lord Visaeon had set his tale of the coming of Ryna, your mother, to Helca's Castle. And then I saw that your trail must lead to the Wood of Seven, as it had done for your mother long ago. But it is to my friend Hunnin that you owe your lives. For I called on him and his allies to scour the lands round about for any sign of you, fearing that the evils which now encroach on this realm might come upon you first. And find you he did—though what would have occurred had you not managed to break free from the shelter of the Wood, I do not like to think.'

Arime looked about the rough chamber for Hunnin.

Tarazion smiled and put out his long arm. The black bird fluttered noisily from the window to sit on his wrist.

'This is Hunnin,' said Tarazion, 'and he has served you well, as he has served me for many a year. It was he who espied you from afar, two small shapes, surrounded by hungry wolves, lost in the wilderness. And he returned to me swiftly, where I rode as fast as the wind down the road from the north, sending other birds also by swift winds to protect you for a while from the scavenging beasts. But I came just in time, for hungry wolves are not long afraid of birds, however loyally they may fight, and as I rode from the road to the moors our friends had almost yielded.'

Arime looked with amazement at the huge raven as it preened its sharp, black feathers in the firelight.

'You...speak to the bird? It understands speech?' he asked.

'We speak to one another, you might say, but speech as you know it is only the distant cousin of our language. And so I brought you here, to this tiny hovel, a shepherd's hut high on the Grey Moors, and here tended you.'

Arime could find no further words for a while in his astonishment. He saw the fire burning near him and felt the strength coming back into his fingers and bones as he lay there. He also began to feel very hungry. Tarazion, as if sensing this, gave him bread and some dried meat, and wine from a leather flask. Then Arime, feeling much stronger, asked at last about returning to Helca's Castle, and about Lonia's health.

'Not so simple now,' said Tarazion. 'Tales and lives move on, whether we will or no, and now our way back is blocked. In answering one question, I can answer both, I think, and

show you another wonder. For when I lay you both down in the straw and could at last examine you, I saw at once that there was more to your fevers than a few days in the wilderness without food: Lonia especially had fallen prey to an evil shadow, a dark disease beyond the reach of mere food and water, and she had lost much blood. I was forced then to make another difficult decision as you lay there, unaware of the world. I knew that in the wild, far from the homes of men, there were few remedies which might save your lives, and I could see that Lonia was far gone and might perish that night were I not to act swiftly. So I left you here and journeyed back across the moor to the place wherein lay my only hope.'

'Is there some sorcerer's den nearby, then?' asked Arime. 'The home of a great healer?'

'Nay,' replied the one-eyed man, 'the place of my hope was the Wood itself. Not all that dwells there is evil. Perhaps in a dell near the edge of the forest I might find that which I sought: the healing flower of legend, greatest of the gifts of Kaela that survived the ancient world. And indeed it was so—but it was hardly won. For, as I came back to the road and the wood's edge, I looked from a sheltered place on a sight of great foreboding. A great host, larger than has ever been seen since the beginning of the Secondpeace so near to Restonia, was passing up the road: company upon company of Turgalins, and wagons laden with stores and weapons, and horses, and other beasts and creatures more evil. And it is my belief that before them and with them came the plague which has struck at you and your companion, but on that score we shall see. Many hours did I wait in hiding watching that

army march by —and as evening fell, still it had not passed, but camps were made and fires sprang up between me and the wood, in a long line stretching north and south into darkness.'

'Then you could not reach the flower of healing?'

'I am not so easily dissuaded, boy, or you would not now be living to ask me such a question. I waited till the dead of night, and stole between the sentries and across the edge of the moor into the wood —and as the dawn came I found what I sought deep in a shadowy glen. Just in time —for in the half-light and confusion, I slipped through the lines once again and returned here. But our road back to Restonia is now severed, and there will be much blood spilt on those borders ere another day dawns.'

'Can we not do something?' said Arime, shivering. 'Is there no hope for Shand?'

'About hope, we shall see in a moment,' said the old man. 'For now, let your eyes be content to feast on one of the wonders of Gandria.'

Tarazion then revealed from beneath his cloak a shining flower, burning yellower than gold in the sunlight, and all that room shone with it as though a winter's night had turned to a summer's day in a breath.

'Behold, Farndonath, deadly to dragons, they say, though they know not the truth of it,' he said. 'Dragons are not so easily slain, nor do they fear anything that lives in the mortal world. Say rather that, as a thing of beauty as potent as themselves, they respect this flower and will not burn or devour it. It has many properties. With this there is some hope of rescuing Lonja from the fever.'

He moved across the room and held the flower to Lonia's sleeping face, and she breathed its light, which filled the chamber with an aroma like a summer wind. She moaned, frowning and stirring, and then her face shone calmer and her breathing eased.

'She must rest for a while longer,' said Tarazion quietly, 'but she will sleep easier now, and the dreams brought on by the fever will fade.'

He came back to Arime's side. Hunnin went back to his place by the window.

'Then tell me now of all of this,' said Arime. 'For you have yet to tell me all that you know, whether I am High King or not. Where are we now to go, and what are we to do?'

'All?' said the one-eyed man as he sat down. 'All? How does a man tell all to another? What may be known to me might find no place in your mind to be known by you. You are young, and I would not overfill your cup lest the knowledge spill and stain your life. And yet you are right in one way —I have perhaps ill-judged your readiness all your life. I know only too well the impatience and anxiety of a father, being too close to his child to wish to burden him, yet too wise to believe that he will never need to lay that burden. I too have a son, as I have said —there is much I would speak of with him.'

Tarazion threw more wood on the fire and stared into its flames as he spoke. Arime sat there, watching the firelight weave itself into the pale glow of the flower which lay on Lonia's breast, until his eyes could not tell which was the greater light.

'You said before that you had to leave your son,' said

Arime, quietly.

Tarazion turned and nodded, smiling sadly.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘and I had a wife, his mother. And a brief joy, potent as the wine of the gods, was mine. So was I blinded; so was I delayed. So I came late to your mother, Ryna, and so has there been much needless sorrow in the world. Sometimes we must pay for the world’s freedom with our own happiness. Sometimes the light of joy is the light that blinds.’

There was a long silence. Arime did not understand, but was afraid to ask more. After a long while, Tarazion drew himself out of his own thought and spoke again.

‘I must not drift with the mind’s tide like this. You are my ward now, and your questions must be answered as best they may. For in you and through you lies hope, for all of us.

‘I promised your mother that I would watch over you and your sister, seeking thus to redress the balance which I had let slip. But Ryna knew that Syra walked near the edge of the abyss, and that her soul teetered on the brink, leaning out into a dark wind. I failed with your sister, despite my years at her side, and when we learned of the assassins she had called into Tara, I judged that it was time to flee with you. Since then, I have returned to the High Houses in secret to watch her, and much that was before hidden from me has become clear. I wondered how she had fallen so deeply into the void—but I see now that there are windows in the High Houses which look further than the sea. So was your mother ensnared by the dark will of our enemies. There is a twisted mirror there, in the heart of Tara, a thing of evil magic. Great power spills out from it; I know whence that power comes,

but its nature defies me —it is stronger than I. Our enemy has a strength greater than I understand, Arime. But that is another part of the tale.

‘Where should I begin? It is important that you know more, now that you are old enough and now that events have brought us to this.’

He pondered the fire again for a while.

‘You know now that you are indeed the Heir, with your sister, to the High Throne of Shand, that has stood empty for many years,’ he went on. ‘Not many have that knowledge, for the line of Valkurn was believed lost in the Great Western Wild more than a generation since. But I knew when Alagar met Lisaeon a new hope blossomed, and I was anxious to protect them. When they perished in the wild, it seemed that that hope was cut short —yet it became clear this was not so when the Companions of the Wood found a new-born babe in the Wood of Seven more than fifty years ago. They sent word to those places where ancient powers dwelt still, and this word reached me in Rondar in the west, to the north of the Tarrabelner, far from here. It was clear to them that this was the child of Alagar and Lisaeon, and thus the inheritor long-awaited.’

‘I rode forth swiftly, but in the wilderness, where evil bands roamed, I was set upon and driven north, coming by long roads to a different end. There, in my folly and desire, I laid aside my errand and sought my own happiness for a while, thinking that destiny would guard Ryna, your mother, and that she would come to her throne without me. I was lost for a time in a dream within a dream.’

‘How little power do we grant to ourselves in this world!’

For if I had been there, Ryna would not, perhaps, have wandered from the road Raendu had laid before her feet — she would, maybe, have walked it to its end, and my duty would have been done, more fully than I could imagine. But I tarried, and took joy in the birth of a son and the love of a wife, and while I did so Ryna came from the Wood to Restonia, and rode forth with the Crimson Company, and then strayed from the path appointed.

‘Then did I see my error —and then did I pay in my heart. For I had to leave my own son, and ride forth again, coming this time, by the road I too had strayed from, to your mother’s side, at the very end. Then I swore to her to guard her children, but even in that I have almost failed: Syra’s soul is in peril, while you have wandered close to death in the wild. Raendu’s road is clear enough —it is our own folly that betrays us.’

The fire crackled as Arime listened. Tarazion had never before spoken like this. Arime felt any sound would break the spell now weaving around him: the story of the one-eyed man, that few, he guessed, had heard. He lay still as Tarazion went on:

‘So, returning from the east over the mountains, I found you gone —and I perceived my failure with you too, and the turmoil in your heart. Greater urgency than you know attended your disappearance, for only a short while before I had held counsel with the kings and lords of Shand at Shandhall in the heart of the kingdom, north of the Seat of Stonehammer. This I must tell a little of. There they had come at my bidding, for I had brought news to them earlier in the year of all that had befallen in Tara, and other news besides

of the affairs of men in the world. They had sat before me around the great table in the Hall of Counsel, with a blazing fire in the hearth—but all of them were cold and afraid, if I am any judge of mortal men. And I spoke to them, for I had had word before any of them of certain events that chilled my own heart: the enemy had struck at Valadria through the plains of Hethrian, and Raegarth of that realm had lost many of his people. We had known then that the enemy felt himself ready to strike even into Shand itself, being confident in his possession of Tara. Vast hosts had been amassed in the ports of Tara, burdening her, and the people there suffered under Syra.'

Arime remembered his dark vision in the mirror of his sister's deceit—he had not yet spoken of it to Tarazion, and did not wish to speak now. He shivered.

'Shand itself may yet hold out for the winter,' Tarazion went on, 'but our enemies have other weapons, less easy to contain: plague, sorcery, deception. Even now the Middle Lands are a chaos of disunity and rebellion, which his spies and traitors have brought about—for he triumphs not only in force of arms. His hosts also march unhindered now in the northern quarter—and they are driven by a lust which is inhuman in its source—their warriors fight as ones possessed by a greater power than themselves.

'I did not wish to weave so dark a tapestry for their eyes, Arime, but those lords and kings had long meditated on these matters. They knew the irresistible power of the Dark Isles and had felt its reaching shadow for many years. But what hope had I to offer them? We talked of the strategems of war, but no light shone through, for the enemy has

overwhelming numbers, and there is a darkness in the eyes of his servants which we cannot yet match with light in ours. Seeing their spirits flag at such a vital time was more than I could bear. I told them that which I had kept to myself, and which no more than a handful in all Gandria knew.'

'What did you tell them? Of the Heirs to the Throne that you had found?' whispered Arime.

'Aye—but more. I told them that Hope had a name,' the one-eyed man said, looking at Arime as he spoke. 'I told them of the Sword Sundergost.'

The name of the sword hung in the firelit air for a moment before anyone spoke. Then Arime said, quietly:

'I do not understand.'

Tarazion was silent. The flames crackled, Lonia slept on. Outside the moaning wind moved across the moors.

'Deep in the Dark Isles dwells Dare-kor, who calls himself Dragonlord and who leads his Dark Circle, the Morndred,' said Tarazion, turning his gaze back to the fire. 'From the Citadel of the Four Winds he looks out over the world he plans to conquer and subdue to the will of his dark god, Gon-runin the Usurper. But beneath that fortress, in the heat of the Firevault whence it seems all evil comes, there is a deeper darkness that neither I, nor any of the wise, have been able to pierce. Something living lies in that great black heart, but of what kind it is I do not know. Perhaps it is his god, but somehow I think not. From it, Dare-kor draws all his strength—a strength that gives all his servants more power than they would otherwise possess, a strength that enables him to reach across the sea with his sorceries, a strength that summons souls to him from the world of light. There is no

power strong enough in all the world to defy him, it seems, until that veil of mystery is pierced.

‘Ryna did not pierce it, though she thought she did: she was ensnared too, as others have been, and took from the halls of Wormstone only that which Dare-kor intended her to have. With the Jewel Sterreth he knew that he could dominate her will, and thus bring even Valkurn’s Heir under his shadow. Thus he drew her from her appointed road; thus does that road lie unwalked still. Even Valkurn’s Heir, then, was not enough. Even Ryna, though she was saved at the end, could not see into the centre of the Dragonlord’s power. Something more was needed than the Heir to the long-empty Throne.’

Arime spoke:

‘And that something —is the Sword Sundergost?’

Tarazion nodded, turning to him.

‘Aye, my prince,’ he said, ‘I think you begin to see. Only Valkurn’s Heir can reclaim the Sword; only with both heir and sword together might this shadow be broken. It is as I said to you on the battlements of the High Houses. The Sword must be found.’

Arime fell silent.

‘Arime,’ Tarazion said gently, ‘I have told you why this road remains unwalked. If I had done my first duty, you would not need to walk it now, for your mother, perhaps, would have accomplished the quest before you —or maybe lain dead before you were born, I cannot say. I can only hope for your forgiveness. But now we are faced with the same choice as she faced: to go on, or to go elsewhere. This time, at least, I am with you. I was not with her when she needed

me, save at the end.'

Arime felt suddenly full of grief. The world had become too large for him again. There was a long quietness in which he heard Hunnin shuffle on his perch, and a log fall in the fire. He did not know what path to take, nor what seeking Sundergost meant.

'I do not know this road of which you speak,' he said at last. 'Which way does it lie?'

'I know the way,' said Tarazion. 'It is straight enough — but, as I say, a blackness lies across the path so that I cannot see its end. Only with Sundergost can we hope to cleave that darkness.'

Another silence fell, so deep that it seemed to ripple out from the shepherd's hut across the moors into the endless night.

'I cannot compel you to seek the Sword,' said Tarazion at last, quietly. 'No man can. Nor would you be able to pluck it from the scabbard wherein it sits without it burning your hand, unless you did so with a willing heart.'

'What are you saying?' said Arime. 'That the destiny of all the lands truly depends on me?'

Tarazion sighed and warmed his hands.

'Is it ever otherwise, prince?' he said. 'Mortal choices are the loom of the world. But they should not —I would say cannot— be forced, or the tapestry which grows from them is twisted forever.'

Arime said nothing.

'Listen,' Tarazion went on, 'it is true that you are faced with an unfair choice. No one asked you to be born with the blood you have. And the shadow of your mother has hung

over you all your life, as I perhaps should have seen earlier. But what remains to us is the present moment. That is all that we ever have, all that is. If you should choose to ride from this place into obscurity, never to be seen by any king or lord or any man again, then ride out quickly and freely. None are here to think the worse of you. But, as I learned to my own anguish, though you may escape from the high affairs of men for a while, your own heart is harder to run from: a man may flee the world, but he ever sees it pursuing him, should he look over his shoulder. If you can live that life—and I do not say that it is impossible to do so—then be prepared for the conflicts and joys, the hardships and the triumphs of such a life, and go without guilt. Indeed, even if you choose the road that Raendu puts before you, to ride and claim the Sword and your destiny, there is no guarantee of success, and you are as likely to meet your end in a muddy ditch, unworthy of song, as any man. No path in this world is certain. I simply say choose, choose knowingly, and make the choice your own, being certain that your choices are the threads from which the world is made.'

He put more wood on the fire.

'And choose swiftly,' he added, 'for the world, as the night, grows cold swifter than I can warm it.'

Arime turned to the hole in the wall which served as a window to the hovel, and through which the grey wind moaned. Outside, dim clouds hid a sky full of stars in a moving patchwork which promised storm. The dark moors stretched to the edge of sight. Hunnin flapped his feathers on the sill and gave out a little croaking noise.

'I do not know whether I can walk the road of which you

‘speak,’ said Arime after a while, ‘for I am caught up, I see, in a tale too large for me —yet it seems that there is no other road for me at present. The ways to the only homes I’ve known are blocked. But, as I have said, I do not know the way to the Sword.’

‘Then let me tell you,’ said Tarazion, not turning from the fire.

‘How is it that you know?’ Arime said suddenly, turning back to the one-eyed man. He felt like a puppet on a string pulled by others.

Tarazion looked slowly up at him. There was a weariness and heaviness in his one eye, but Arime refused to see it.

‘If I am to be High King,’ Arime went on, ‘then I demand to know.’

Tarazion bowed his head slightly, and sighed again.

‘Arime,’ he began, ‘there is much that you may rightfully demand, and much that is outside even your authority —for do not forget that you are but a mortal man, and though you may be yet a king among men, you have much yet to learn if you believe that you have the power to demand much from one of my kind. Though I am mortal too, I do not walk this road unarmed with power.’

He had not spoken loudly or harshly but Arime found himself trembling. After a silence, Arime spoke again, more quietly.

‘Who are you Tarazion? Where do you come from? And where are you going?’ he said.

‘Now at last do we come to the heart of the matter, perhaps,’ muttered Tarazion. ‘I cannot tell you all this night, as you have asked, but if we are to proceed soon on this

journey, there are still some things you should know. Of me, you know enough —I am only a servant of Raendu, and a tardy one, as I have said. As we go on together, more will perhaps become clearer to you.

‘Our way back to Restonia is blocked now. We have only the road ahead. The Sword Sundergost lies on that road, but not at its end, as I hope you will come to see —but at the beginning of that road is a gate. Guarding that gate is a Keeper, and it is to him that we must go.’

‘You speak as though we are to journey through a tale, or in a dream,’ said Arime. ‘Are these things, these places, real?’

‘Too real, some would say, and I hope you have the heart for the journey, for the sun shines on only part of our road. I may seem to speak in riddles, but you will see the truth soon enough.’

‘Where does this Keeper dwell, then?’ asked Arime.

‘At Wenfold Well in the Guardian Mountains, far south of here. There lies our path. That is where Ryna hoped to come, before she was taken elsewhere. But we cannot begin tonight. And Lonia must be well before we set out.’

‘Is she to come with us, then? And what of Shand? Are we to abandon it to the invaders?’

‘Lonia must come,’ he said, ‘there is little choice. And even if there were, I am not sure it would be easy to prevent her from following you.’

‘Why?’ said Arime.

‘Prince, think!’ snapped the one-eyed man. ‘I have made many allowances tonight because of your ordeal, but you must not now pretend to be blind, and begin to regain the use of your own senses! Why do you think she followed you

to the Wood? You tell me she saved your life from the wolf you met at the edge of the forest —has this not struck you as odd, or at least worthy of thought? Can you not see the love she has for you?’

Arime paused, looking across at Lonia where she lay, now sleeping peacefully on the straw at the other side of the rough room.

‘I broke my promise to her,’ he said quietly. ‘I said I would not go to the Wood. I swore that we should both be struck down if I were to go against her in that.’

‘Then perhaps she is wise enough to be a queen, and your oaths strong enough to make a king —when you learn to keep them. For you have indeed both been struck down,’ said Tarazion.

‘I?’ said Arime.

‘Who else made the oath? Who else broke it? Never misjudge your own might, Arime,’ said Tarazion.

‘I have been a fool and a child,’ Arime said, after a moment, ‘and said and done foolish and childish things. I do not know what it is that makes me do them.’

‘Yes you do,’ said Tarazion, ‘but perhaps you cannot see it yet. You are only nineteen summers old, Arime, and are being rushed to a fuller manhood than most. When you are large enough to forgive yourself will you perhaps see what it is that drives you to folly. But now we must both rest —for I have not slept for many a night. As for Shand, we are not abandoning her —we cannot return there now, but if our quest is successful we may yet hold against the tide of evil that sweeps into the world.’

So saying he rolled himself up in a thick blanket and lay

with his back to Arime and the fire, and Arime watched the flames as he drifted off to sleep himself.

'Raendu watch over you, Tarazion,' he muttered, but heard no answer, and could not be sure if he had spoken aloud.

THE BOOK OF SEVEN

*Into the Underworld there are many doors;
Out of it there are few.*

-from The Book of Seven

That night Arime was haunted by two dreams. In the first, he lay in the straw bed of the shepherd's hut, but grey wolves pawed and sniffed at the door and leapt at the window and he could not get out. He screamed, and thought that he had woken—but he had stepped instead into the second dream.

In this, he was in a dark room, in silence. He put out his hands but could feel no walls until he had crawled for several feet. He felt rough rock around him, and knew that he was in a cave deep underground. It was cold and completely black, so dark that he imagined himself covered in its blackness—but suddenly ahead there was a narrow window. It seemed to him in the dream that through that window lay a whole kingdom of light and open fields, and he ran towards it. But as he drew nearer, the window drew further away. Finally, his lungs bursting, he grasped at it. It was tall, thin, like a rod of light rather than a window, shaped like a sword. It broke as he reached towards it, and the light went out. He saw in the darkness that he would have to go on through those endless caves in a journey without light. He shouted out in terror, and this time properly awoke.

Faint grey light filtered into the hut. Tarazion was gone,

but the horses which had brought them there were still tethered outside. Lonia's bed was empty also. Arime leapt up, steadying himself against the wall as he swayed with dizziness. There was no sign either of the black bird Hunnin. He looked out of the small window. Lonia stood on the hillside, a small figure against the sky, watching the dawn. He went out to her.

She did not turn to him as he drew near. He paused.

'I am sorry,' he said. 'I broke my oath to you, and placed both our lives in danger. I have been foolish and rash, worse than a child. Will you forgive me?'

Lonia turned to him and smiled. As if for the first time, as the first rays of the sun caught her red-gold hair, he saw her beauty.

'Arime,' she said in the High Tongue, 'know that for better or worse I love thee. I am to be thy queen.'

As soon as she had spoken the words she stepped back from him, as if wishing she could draw them back into her mouth. She looked at him, astonished.

'Wherefore sayest thou this?' he said, feeling dizzy again.

'I do not know. The words came unbidden,' she told him. A silence followed in which both of them looked out at the surrounding sweep of the wild moors. No other sign of habitation, nor any other living thing at all save the wind-blown grass, could be seen to the edge of sight. In the east the sun slowly rose above a bank of heavy cloud and brightened the sky. Its warmth seemed to melt the silence around them. Arime turned to Lonia and said:

'Lonia, I love thee, and would happily take thee as my queen.'

She took his hand. They said no more for a long while as the light grew.

‘But I am not yet a king, and it may be that I shall be merely a dead man before this winter is out,’ he added at last. ‘Where is Tarazion? And how is your fever, and your wound?’

‘The fever is gone, and the wound has healed well enough. Tarazion bathed my brow this morning—he told me of all that has happened, and then he went to find food and water.’ She turned towards Restonia. ‘Perhaps we shall never come to my home again,’ she said.

They returned to the hut, and presently Tarazion came in with water and two rabbits which he proceeded to prepare while they made a fresh fire from the remaining firewood. After they had all eaten and rested for a while longer, they set out. Arime had asked no more questions of the one-eyed man, but saw that he led them south. They climbed the grey ridge and looked down on the hut and the shallow basin of the moor in which it stood. Suddenly, Tarazion raised himself in the saddle and called out in a tongue which Arime did not recognise but which thrilled his blood. A single caw sounded above, and Arime saw the far-off shape of a large crow against the pale sky.

‘It is always well to say farewell to good friends,’ the one-eyed man said as he turned and led them off down the slope.

They rode all that day and for two more days mostly in silence. Tarazion did not hurry them, nor did he speak much to them of other things. Arime no longer felt like asking questions. Instead he found himself taking a new pleasure in Lonia’s company. It was not a pleasure of conversation—in

fact, they said less to each other during that ride than they had before— but a pleasure of company alone. It filled him with a warmth he had not known simply to ride near her, to share food with her, to sit by the fire with her. Tarazion was a tall, phantom shape on the edge of a new world. The moors, wild and open and cold, were a stage for a silent drama, almost a dance, in which he felt himself drawn nearer and nearer to something in her, and she to him. They slept roughly, wrapped in blankets near dying fires; their food was caught in the wild, lightly cooked and never enough; their bodies ached from the saddle and shivered from the icy wind—but Arime was adrift in a warm current which flowed between his deepest self and hers, and discomfort, cold and hunger were a mere shell around this growing thing.

The landscape did not change much around them. The shallow valleys and low ridges over which they rode might have been the same ones repeated hour after hour, until, on the morning of the fourth day since they had left the hut, a broader valley opened out at the foot of the ridge over which they had come, and Tarazion paused. South and west they could dimly make out the shape of fields in the morning mist, split by a thin, bright river which ran down from the moors to the west and spilled over a shallow ford about two miles before them. Further south, on the furthest horizon, was a heavier look in the land that might have been just a bank of cloud, but which Arime knew from his maps must be the still-distant Guardian Mountains. Eastwards they could see nothing but the higher plateau of moors, pale under the winter sun. They were bitterly cold in limb and heart now, and the promise of the lands ahead looked good to them, but

Tarazion warned them.

‘Behold, Prundria, a kingdom of the Middle Lands,’ he said. ‘We cannot trust it, I am afraid, for all the eastern Middle Lands have fallen to the conqueror, and will be filled with evil folk. We must be very cautious, and ride now only at night, and by secret roads. We must reach Tarrabelner within three days.’

‘And what then?’ asked Arime, his voice sounding weak and bitter.

‘Onward,’ replied Tarazion, ‘to the Mountains.’

‘When can we rest?’ asked Lonia.

Tarazion looked on them and smiled a strange smile.

‘Perhaps never again,’ he said. ‘We do not ride towards rest, remember, but to greater danger. And if we are to accomplish this deed and bring the Sword out of the Darkness, then Rest ends there, for there will be a kingdom to be won. But there are joys to be had on the way. One of the chief of these, I hope, will be Wenfold Well in the Guardian Mountains.’

With that he urged them down across the lands towards the ford, and they paused again at a small copse of twisted trees, the first they had seen since the wood.

‘Here we will spend the day, and sleep if we can,’ he said, ‘for it is likely that the ford itself is watched by day, and we will need all our strength tonight.’

They made what camp they could. As Arime unrolled his blanket, he felt that a dream in which he had been wandering was dissipating, and the hard world closing in on him again.

‘Tarazion,’ he said, ‘what then? I mean —you are leading us towards the Sword, that much I doubt not. And with

fortune, perhaps we will come away with it, though what roads I must yet walk I know not. But what then? What can one man do with one sword, even if that sword is Sundergost? How can we possibly hope to save Shand from the Shadowed Men, or Tara, or the Middle Lands? What is the use of this journey?’

Tarazion, who was already well wrapped in his blankets, lifted himself on his elbow and turned to Arime.

‘These at last are the questions you should be asking,’ he said. ‘What indeed? For you are right. A thousand thousand swords now besiege Shand; many more than that hold the Middle Lands and Tara crushed and pinned; Turgal and the Reavers provide host after host of men to replace any fallen in battle. Our position seems hopeless. And against this, it seems I pin all hope on a boy riding forth with an ancient sword from the almost-forgotten past.’

He drew himself closer to Arime.

‘And so we would despair, for one sword is not enough against so many,’ he said. ‘But even if we had a thousand horsemen fully armed, as the vanguard of a larger force uncounted, it would not be enough: for there is a wisdom here. Swords beget swords, and blood begets blood. There is not enough might in the whole world to do away with might. The answer lies not in the Sword but in what is done with it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A hundred blows may serve only to enrage a warrior,’ said the one-eyed man, ‘but one blow in the right place and he will lay down his weapons freely and return to his plough, a warrior no more. And that blow need not even be on his own body.’

‘Then where must that blow fall? Must we stalk the Reaver Kings, or the Emperor himself, and slay them all?’

‘Nay, I said not slay. One blow might free them all beyond any need of slaying. For all swords need hands to wield them, and all hands need wills to drive them, and evil wills need something to hold them in thrall,’ said Tarazion, and he looked keenly into Arime’s eyes. ‘Do not misunderstand me, prince,’ he said. ‘I do not ride on a marked path to a clear end. Like you, I follow. And the road ahead disappears into a darkness beyond which I cannot see, as I have said —and this is only a little way ahead of where your eyes lose it, too. But the difference is that I know that there is a road, and you do not. It is to help you to see it that I came to you in this world, I think. Do not despair! This is Raendu’s Dream, though it may often seem not so.’

Arime stared out of the copse, watching the beads of dew drip into the stiff grass. Fog had arisen in the valley and he could not see much else. He was too afraid to look at Tarazion’s eye again. His companion settled himself in his bed. Arime felt his mind empty of all solidity, like the fog which surrounded them.

‘Then...’ he began, but found it hard to complete his thought.

‘The eye that looks down on the map may find the landscape changed when he walks the land,’ muttered Tarazion, not looking at him. ‘But if he remembers that there is a map, and that there are chief features on it which do not change, he has some hope of finishing his journey. Try to sleep now, Arime. Take some pity on a man whose bones ache much worse than yours with this cold. Would that we

could have come this way in the summer! Then this whole moor bathes in golden light and brims over with flowers! But, like mortals we must grow with the seasons. Rest now!

They rode on that night, and the next, crossing the ford without incident, and slowly climbing up the other side of the valley. Here great forests of pine grew on rolling hills, and the air, protected from the frosty winds of the moors, seemed warmer. They still met no living man, and saw little else that moved—a few winter birds, a fox in his winter coat, and once, far off through the trees, a shambling shape that looked like a bear, heading away from them. On the third day after crossing the ford, snow began to fall in the hills, quietly and steadily, and the air grew colder than before but very still. They drew their cloaks tightly around them, and longed for the end of the journey.

There came a night when the snow ceased and they reached a gap in the ridge before them, and looked out through trees on either side onto another valley, this time deeper. The stars in the sky looked like snowflakes frozen in time; at the bottom of the valley, still some miles away, wound a broad river from left to right. Ahead of them, across the river, as though they had crept closer than seemed possible during the snow, loomed the huge shapes of the Guardian Mountains, their slopes white like shrouds in the frosty light. Arime knew without having to be told that the river was Tarrabelner, rising from Lake Lendrim in the east to wind through the Middle Lands at the feet of the mountains. He looked at Lonia: her face shone. She had never journeyed so far from Restonia before, never seen so great a river, and

was overawed by the size of the world.

Tarazion pulled them abruptly back beneath the shelter of the trees, and pointed. Far below them, alongside the river, ran a thin road, and along this road shapes moved. Arime stared. He could make out slow-moving wagons, pulled by oxen, laden with goods, and troops of horsemen, some galloping swiftly. Most of the traffic was heading from the east to the west.

‘The road to war,’ said Tarazion grimly.

They watched as line after line of horsemen and wagons full of baggage passed. It was now the middle of the night, but still they came. Finally, after about an hour, Arime saw fires spring up, and gradually the movements ceased, the beasts and men gathered around the flames, and a chain of lights stretched across their path. Occasionally, a mounted sentry would ride slowly down the line. Sometimes a swifter rider, a messenger, would gallop from one edge of their sight to the other. They could hear no sounds.

‘This is the lifeline of the enemy,’ said Tarazion after such a long pause that his voice startled them. ‘Would that we could sever it! For it feeds the misery of the lands to the west and north of us. But our task is merely to cross it for the present, and that will be difficult enough. The line I crossed to reach the Wood from the Moor was not so thick as this, nor so well guarded—and I was alone. We must pass, mounted, undetected, and be in the foothills of yonder mountains before dawn. Both ourselves and our horses need rest and good food and warmth in our bones before much longer.’

Their answer, or part of it, was not long in coming. As they watched, pale clouds closed in over the stars and it began to

snow, soon even more thickly than it had done before. Within an hour, the world became a swirling, white and grey sphere not more than ten yards across, and their horses stood in a drift. The wind was still light, though, and there was no sound, except for the tired breathing of the horses.

‘Let us go on,’ said Tarazion suddenly, and he led them steadily forward, down the valley, crunching through the soft whiteness.

The land soon levelled out and they knew that they were on the river-plain, though they could see nothing but the snow-storm all around them. Tarazion now proceeded very cautiously. The snow changed everything: it muffled all sounds, altered all light, distorted all distance. This, thought Arime, could work for them or against them. Step by weary step they moved forward. One of the horses —Arime could not tell which— neighed. Tarazion stopped them all. Ahead —or was it to the right?— Arime could hear the troubled roar of a partly-frozen river, a hissing sound mixed with a booming. He had a sudden memory of the Forest Lodge in northern Tara where he had spent one winter as a child and watched the rivers freeze into fantastic shapes as the season drew on —but here his heart beat with fear. He watched closely as Tarazion beckoned them on.

Away to their left, and a little behind, Arime thought he could see the light of a fire, but it was difficult to tell how far away it was. He could hear distant voices now, but could make out no words —it seemed to be another language he was hearing, but perhaps the snow merely muffled what was said.

Somewhere another horse stirred, not one of their own.

Tarazion paused again. The sound of the river was now quite close and definitely ahead. A loud voice spoke nearby.

Tarazion signalled for them to ride on swiftly. They jumped forward. A tall shape loomed out of the shadows to their left and cried out. Tarazion rode straight at it; horses neighed, and then reared in the falling snow. Arime could not make out what happened —his own horse plunged on, Lonía at his side.

Suddenly they were slithering down a short slope and riding on a white, uneven surface which sounded odd beneath the hoofs of their horses. He realised it was the river. His horse grew afraid and skidded slightly. He spoke calmly to him and eased him back to balance. Lonía was now slightly ahead, but he was not sure if Tarazion followed: some indeterminate sound could be heard behind them.

He rode on, catching up with Lonía. They were now well out on the frozen surface, and the noise of still-running water told them that the ice was unsafe nearby. They moved very slowly. Waves of cold smote them from below. Then there was a crack, and Arime felt a distinct dizziness. The ground seemed to move. Snow still swirled all around them, but he had the impression that they were moving. With a shock he realised that they were standing on a platform of ice which had broken free under their weight and which was now drifting with a swift current. It bumped into something. The horses, beginning to panic, jumped forward. Arime prepared himself for the shock of cold as they hit the water, but their hoofs hit something solid instead —another floor of ice. They rode on at some speed, unsure of their direction. Within a few minutes, Arime was scratched across his face by

something —the branches of a tree. Dark shapes gathered around them, and soon they were among them, and clambering from the surface of the river into welcoming bushes on the bank.

But which bank? In the snow, Arime could not tell which way he faced. He dismounted, calming his steed, and Lonia did likewise. They peered back across the white river, but could see little through the silent storm.

Muffled sounds reached them from across the ice. Cries, and noises of metal against metal rang out. Breathlessly they waited. Suddenly, slightly to their right, a shape came out of the trees.

‘Mount, and ride!’ cried Tarazion, for it was he.

They obeyed quickly and plunged on through cold and wet branches to places under them where the snow had not reached. Before long they were climbing a steep slope. Arime looked back. Through a web of dark branches and a veil of falling snow he could see the broad band of ice which was the river, and a dim greyness which was the opposite bank. He could see no movements.

‘Ride!’ cried Tarazion and urged him on.

They climbed and climbed. Soon the horses would go no further. The snow began to ease, and the mist from the horses’ breath rose about them. They stopped in a shadowy thicket.

‘What happened?’ asked Arime as soon as he could get his breath.

‘A narrow escape,’ replied Tarazion, ‘but an escape nonetheless. We came near to a sentry. I had to fight him. Fortunately, a party of strange horses and riders in the

middle of the wilderness in snow was the last thing he was expecting. He will have raised the alarm, though. We cannot rest for long.'

'Will they pursue us?' asked Lonia.

'I do not know,' he answered. 'I think not —not for long anyway. They cannot know who we are, and we were obviously not many. Maybe they will not spare the strength. I only hope that the sentry did not recognise me.'

'Is he likely to?' asked Lonia. 'Are you known to all our enemies?'

'Not as such —but a one-eyed man, riding with youths from the Grey Moors? If they have had word of my movements in Shand, perhaps some commander will puzzle me out. But by then we shall be far from here and safe, I hope.'

'How far is it now to Wenfold Well?' asked Arime. 'Our poor steeds will not last much longer —and neither will I without a fire and food.'

'By the end of tomorrow's day I hope you will lie in a warm bed!' said Tarazion. 'But let us go on swiftly now! For if we are pursued, you are as likely to lie in a cold grave tonight. I must search for the road.'

Despite the protests of the horses and their own bones, they went on upwards, climbing now above the woods. The snow eased, then stopped. Looking back they could see the whole river-valley, and beneath them the road with its fires. Nothing stirred on this side of the Tarrabelner. They had left the Middle Lands and were in the foothills of the Guardian Mountains, on the edge of the lands of men. Everything was covered with white; stars came out again above.

Soon the view was lost behind a shoulder of land. Tarazion pushed them on and on, until Arime could no longer feel his hands or feet and began to grow drowsy. They entered a deep gorge leading into the heart of the mountains. Darkness grew. The soft and weary tread of the horses, muffled by snow, was the only sound. Arime was only dimly aware of sliding from his saddle as a grey light grew about him, and then he was gone into a dark sleep.

That day, most of it spent unconscious in a cold and deathly sleep, was blurred in Arime's memory. He felt as though he lay in a box, surrounded by ice, with the concerned faces of those he knew looking in at him. Then, while it seemed scarcely light outside, Tarazion woke him again, and placed him in the saddle—he was too weak to move himself—and he felt himself slowly being led onward to somewhere vague: he had forgotten the idea of warmth and shelter, or the purpose of their journey.

There came a time—hours or days later, he could not tell—when he looked back rather than ahead at that cold, grey time, and he realised that he was awake. He wondered immediately if he were still dreaming, for he lay in a comfortable room, neither too small nor too large, and all around him was a warm light. He had forgotten the look of firelight indoors. He turned and looked about him.

A bright fire burned in a hearth. He lay under many coverlets in a deep and soft feather bed. His own skin was warm to the touch. A steaming drink was within reach: it smelled of wine and something earthy and wholesome. His whole body tingled. For a long while he dared not move too

much lest he disturb some magic which held him there, but then he decided to get up. A thick, woollen robe hung from the door. He put it on and quietly looked out of the room.

A short passage ran to the top of a staircase. The light of day poured in through some small windows, too high for him to reach. Thick, richly coloured rugs adorned the tiled floor of the passage and his room. His feet sank into them.

Where was he? This place seemed to have nothing to do with the last memories of his journey, nor with anything else in his life. Nothing stirred. He crept down the passage and peered down the stairs. Wood and stone, carved and polished, shone all around him. It was like the grand house of a great king, rich and large and deep. He went down the stairs. Doors opened off on either side, but he dared not try them. Something led him on.

The bottom of the stairs was in semi-darkness. He could make out what appeared to be statues and pictures there. The soft rugs continued, tempting him on. He came out into a huge hall, black and cold, which had glimpses of other staircases on the other side, leading up and down into gloom. He shivered, and considered returning to the room with the fire—but something still drew him on. Ahead, at one end of the hall, stood a great door, larger than any Arime had seen, made, it seemed from the trunks of mighty trees, carved and fitted together with great skill. He paused before them. Was this the house of a Giant? He crept slowly on. The great door was not completely closed. A dim light showed within. He could almost see through the gap into the vast chamber beyond.

'Arime!' said a voice behind him. He twisted round.

Coming down the staircase which he had descended was a very old man with a pure white beard and partly bald head. He was bent, and used a walking stick as he hobbled down a step or two more, beckoning to Arime. Arime walked slowly towards him, swallowing.

‘You should not yet have arisen,’ said the old man kindly, as Arime climbed the stairs to him. He placed a gentle hand on Arime’s head. ‘But perhaps enough warmth has returned. Come, let us climb back up to your room and sit before the fire!’

Arime followed the old man back to the firelit room, and at his persuasion, climbed back into bed. The old man then pulled up a chair and sat down.

‘I am the Warden of Wenfold Well. I have taken many names in my long, long life, but none of them mean much now. You may call me Warden,’ he said, and paused. ‘You will have some questions?’ he added after a few moments.

Yes,’ Arime said. He was not sure where to begin. ‘Where is Lonia? And Tarazion?’

‘Both safe, both downstairs. You have been badly strained by the frost, and your journey, as were they. They have been resting too.’

‘What is this place?’

‘Wenfold Well. You came here yesterday evening. It is now about three in the afternoon on the following day. Your horses are stabled and fed, and recovered. All is well, in fact, as it could be, under the circumstances in which you find yourselves.’

‘Circumstances?’

‘Yes. Cut off from your homes, wandering in the wild and

through lands where order is crumbling. Fortunately you have had an experienced guide —and perhaps it was as well that you left when you did. For in a few more days' time you would not have been able to leave Restonia, and your enemies would have hunted you down and slain you —or worse. But you come here by a very thin thread —death by wolf, or Carthog's tooth, or hunger, or sword, all these have you narrowly avoided, and not through your own judgement.'

Arime paused, sipping at the drink. It warmed him again, and stilled his fears. He could not be afraid of the old man — but if this was Wenfold Well, it was not at all as he had imagined it. He had thought it would be a wild place, with perhaps a hermit's hut for shelter. But this place seemed larger and greater than any palace or fortress he had ever seen.

'What do you mean?' he said at last.

'Did not another's arrow save you from the wolf? Did not another's mercy save you from the Carthog? Did not another's wisdom save you from becoming carrion, or dying from plague? And has not another's guidance led you here through many perils?'

Arime saw then that his own folly had started the journey, his own yearnings to find out about his mother and his past, but that, as the old man said, others had risked themselves to keep him safe from the consequences of that folly. He felt suddenly wretched. But the old man spoke again.

'Do not be too harsh with yourself, even so. You are young. Life can be like a harp: others must first guide your fingers until you can play its music.'

‘Do you know Tarazion?’ Arime asked.

The old man got up and stirred the fire.

‘Yes, I know Tarazion,’ he said, sitting down again. ‘Perhaps I know him, and his errand, better than any now living. But whereas he serves Raendu by walking in the world, my service is different: I am the Warden of this place, and have been so for so long that I have almost forgotten what I did before then. It is a very large place. Even I, even after all this time, do not know everything about it. I live in but a small part of it, and that is quite enough for me.’

‘Is it a castle then?’ asked Arime. ‘For it must be mighty among the fortresses of men.’

‘It is neither castle, nor fortress—for it was made in days long before there was any need of protection from war. It lies under the Guardian Mountains: its lowest chamber lies in the foundation of those mountains; its topmost hall amongst the eyries of eagles, far above the clouds. And many doors open from it onto other realms.’

‘Why is it called a Well?’

‘Because near enough at its centre, in a green dell in the heart of the mountains, there is a well that some say is bottomless. And that well falls deep through chamber after chamber until it passes out of light and out of my knowledge. Who knows if water lies at its bottom? I will show it to you when you are well enough.’

Arime fell back on his pillows and closed his eyes. A warm sense of peace swept over him such as he had not felt since childhood, when, he thought, his mother had held him. But she had gone. His mind never seemed able to rest for long.

‘Do you know why we are here?’ he asked suddenly. ‘Has

Tarazion told you?’

‘Yes I do,’ said the Warden, ‘and yes he has. But I knew before he told me. For I have been expecting you.’

Arime looked up at the old man’s kind, blue eyes.

‘Oh, yes!’ the Warden went on. ‘Sooner or later an Heir to the High Throne would walk this road. And sooner or later he—or she— would seek the Sword. I had thought it might be your mother—but she walked a different path, and never reached me.’

‘What do you know of my mother?’ said Arime.

The Warden turned and looked deep into Arime’s eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said, after a while, and half to himself, ‘would that she had not walked away indeed: for now that she has gone, you must walk it, and her path has made yours darker.’

The old man paused and looked along the length of his walking stick as the fire crackled. Then he looked at Arime as if making up his mind about something. He stood up wearily.

‘Come!’ he said. ‘Come with me!’

Arime dressed quickly, in warm, fresh and thick clothes that had been laid out for him, and followed the old man downstairs again. This time they went to the bottom together and crossed the huge, dark hall to the massive door. The Warden paused before it.

‘You can perhaps see why I leave it ajar,’ he said quietly. ‘Were I to close it I’d need a giant’s strength to open it again! And so it has stood thus for many a year.’

He gestured for Arime to step through.

A chamber opened out before them larger than any Arime

had seen. Its walls were so far away that he could only dimly glimpse them. Light came into the hall from his right, high up in the wall, where tall, thin windows opened out onto what might be daylight—but there was not enough light to create more than a dim shadow by the time it reached the floor. The floor was of stone, here and there inlaid with panels of wood. Candelabra burned on thick, polished tables not far away. The Warden stepped up to these and picked up one of them, lighting all its candles, and leading Arime on into the vastness of the place.

‘This is the Library of Wenfold,’ said the Warden, and his hushed voice set off a whisper of strange echoes as though that whole hall stirred with invisible life. As Arime stared, he saw that they were approaching at last the opposite wall, past table after table. Each table was laden with books. Arime had never seen so many books before, even in Tara where he had studied from several. These were large, dusty, rough edged, obviously very much older than the ones in Tara. He had not conceived of such a thing before—that there might be a place for books alone, that there might be so many books, that a person could be so learned that he would wish to surround himself with them. Awe and something akin to fear overtook him: the weight upon weight of all that knowledge pressed down on him like a solid burden. Yet something awoke in him too—a hope that here there might be a clue about himself and the shadow that haunted him.

But the books were too large for him, and they were too many. As Arime approached the far wall, he caught a dim impression of shelves reaching in a shadowy pattern towards the ceiling far above. And on those shelves he thought he

could see yet more books. He swallowed nervously. Then his eye caught something to look at that he could understand: in a hearth at the foot of a wall, looking small and weak in its surroundings but giving off a strong warmth, burned a fire. Arime warmed his hands at it, wondering how the Warden kept this fire burning. Perhaps he had servants, or perhaps this place was haunted by spirits who served him. It was certainly cold and strange enough to be haunted. He turned his mind to what the Warden was saying.

‘In Restonia,’ said the old man, ‘is kept a book. You may have seen it. I would think, from what Tarazion has said and what I guess for myself, that you know the one I mean. But its tales are drawn for the most part from another book. That is kept here at Wenfold, and the one you have seen is only a fragmented copy of that real one. Here is the original.’

He turned and pointed. Not far away the largest book Arime had ever seen lay leaning against a huge stand. The stand was six feet high; the book itself was five feet thick, and was open with three feet of thickness on the left and two on the right. The Warden signed to him to move closer. He stepped up to the open pages, open-mouthed. Firelight glinted on their edges, but the whole thing was too tall for him to see what was written there. It was a thing for giants, not mortals, he thought. He looked closely at one of the mighty leaves, seven feet high and five feet wide. Never had he seen anything like it before —colours so deep, designs so intricate, writing so small and fine. It was like looking into a different world, many different worlds. He looked at the Warden. The old man was watching him keenly.

‘Let me tell you this, Arime,’ he said. ‘In this book is

written, in her own hand, the final tale of your mother, Ryna. She penned it in the Wood of Seven before she died, and Tarazion brought it here to me, and I placed it here, wherein are written all the wonders and tales of the world that come to me, light or dark. Now you must make a choice: to stay and read that tale, or to return with me to the life of sunlight and warmth outside this hall, to your friends who await you. For if you begin reading, you will be enchanted, and must remain till you finish.'

'Is the book magical, then?' asked Arime quietly.

'Nay,' said the old man, 'it is not an enchantment of the book, but of your own soul. You will not be able to cease reading, this I know: mighty souls have been entranced by these pages. But you are not yet recovered, and if you wish my advice, I would say come with me to food, and wine and the company of others.'

'Why then did you bring me here?' said Arime.

'Because all your short life you have sought yourself, and your choices have seemed hounded by the choices of others already made. This has done you no good. It is time for you to begin deciding for yourself. You will not find yourself in these pages, but you should at least be free to read what does lie therein. What is your choice?'

Arime looked around at the great, dark library, its shadowy vault stretching beyond his sight in every direction. Tiny flames flickered in candlesticks, and the faint warmth of the fire scarcely reached him from the hearth. Then he looked again at the book. Its pages shone. The writing beckoned to him. Many tales would fit on pages of this size —his mother's whole life would be no more than a footnote here.

But he must know! Was this not why he had ridden from Helca's Castle? Was this not the mystery which tormented his heart?

He longed to see Lonia and Tarazion again, and he felt weak still—but he looked at the old man who waited in silence and said:

'I would read of my mother.'

The Warden sighed, and said:

'So be it. Turn two pages back. Be careful, for the pages are heavier than they look. I shall return with food and more light, but you will not be otherwise disturbed until you have read all that you wish. I will say this, before I go. Beware, Arime! We do not find ourselves in the past!'

With that the old man turned and was gone.

Arime put his mind to the book. Leaning over he pulled at the huge pages and succeeded in turning two of them back. Colours, words, designs, dazzled his eyes, even in that dim candlelight. He searched the page with his eyes. At first he could make out no words at all, and it seemed the pictures behind the writing were too deep and would obscure what was written, but as his eyes grew used to the light he learned to differentiate between them and scanned over the page, looking for his mother's name. There seemed to be many other things mixed up together on a single page: tales of wars and great deeds in tiny writing, then suddenly a passage on the qualities of certain herbs, then what seemed a poem about a flower and the journey of a bee. Then, in the middle of a journal of traveller's tales, he saw his mother's name, and began to pick out her tale from those around it.

And Arime read there of Ryna, and her ride to the

Haunted Wood, and her meeting with the Green Lady, and what happened thereafter. And it was in her own hand, somehow sewn or worked into the larger pages of the book, and as he read he wept, he knew not why. How long he sat there he did not know —the library and all his memories receded from him: he was lost in the dream of his mother's story.

There was food and drink, he noticed later, on a small table nearby. The candles had all burned down many hours. He felt weak and hungry, and he stiffly ate, warming himself before the fire. He had not heard the Warden come; he had not heard or seen anything other than the images painted by his mother —so vivid were they before his mind's eye that he thought they leapt and moved on the page before him. So at last he knew! Galatar the Giant from Turgal, the Crimson Company, the vision of the Sword, the Twisted Mirror, the pursuit of the Stone and the power it had given her, and the final ride to the Wood. Here it all lay before him, in his mother's own hand, sewn into these huge pages amongst many other fragments. At first he almost swooned in his passion to read that tale; then, as the hours crept by and he read on, he began to feel strange. Night and day may have passed outside —no change of light came into that place, only the steady flicker of candles and firelight, an unchanging evening light— but as he reached the end of the story it seemed that he had taken many years to turn the pages. Weariness stole over him.

She had asked after him, it was true, just as Tarazion said —it was odd to see the one-eyed man there through her eyes, as she saw him at the end of her life. He had not said his

name to her, but had told her that he was the Herald of Raendu. How could that be? The Herald was with Valkurn, a thousand years ago, in the tales. And yet Tarazion was real enough, and Arime knew that the name Tarazion could not be his true name.

But the Warden had been right: he had not found himself there in his mother's words. He knew her better now, and he read there of her love for him, and that was a great release in his heart—but he still did not know himself.

He was exhausted. He felt more deeply tired than after his ride through the snow. He sank into a large and dusty chair near the fire, but he was too tired to sleep. Formless pictures danced through his mind like the flames before him. Warmth eased his weariness, and the wine that the Warden had left heated his blood. But nothing could shift his sense of uneasiness.

The great darkness of that library gathered itself around him like the wings of some giant night creature. A draught blew down the chimney and sparks leapt from the grate. He shivered. How large was this place? He could not make out the walls at either end. He was afraid—but not simply of the dark. He had the impression of touching upon something large and cold within himself, like a sleeping beast in the cold night of his soul, something better left undisturbed. What had driven his mother away from him? Great evil, greater than love; a mighty darkness, a night much bigger than the light. It was a blackness that veiled all love, threatened all bonds. It reached out to sever him from everything that he knew, always. He almost cried out in a sudden terror: he glimpsed in the shadows a movement,

beyond the edge of the firelight.

'Who is it?' he shouted, his tiny voice echoing in the vast chamber.

Lonia stepped forward into the light, a red image painted on the air. She stopped, looking at him strangely.

'Arime,' she said softly, 'are you well? You've been in here for many hours. The Warden said not to disturb you but I was afraid...'

'Afraid? What is there to be afraid of?' he snapped. 'The dark? I have been reading in the Great Book. I have yet to finish what I began. I will come out soon.'

He drank the rest of the wine in his goblet in one gulp and turned away from her.

'I will wait outside,' she said, and was gone.

He felt wretched—he had spoken coldly to her, but felt he should not have spurned the warmth of life that there had been in simply seeing another living soul in that place—particularly Lonia's warmth. He flung the goblet away. It clanged noisily against a table somewhere in the darkness. He turned again to the book.

He had finished the tale of his mother—he had lied to Lonia. But it did not feel as though he had finished with the book. It drew him back to itself, he thought. He wondered if the old man had told him the truth in saying that it was not enchanted. The feeling that he was no more than a pawn in someone else's game came over him, as it had done before.

He looked at the book again. So far he had read only four or five of its pages. Many hundreds of pages remained, not only on the left, where he imagined the tales of history stretching back to the dawn of a distant antiquity, before

even the Dragons came, perhaps; there were also pages on the right, again many hundreds —what did they tell of? The story of his mother was only a few years old, but the book went on for much longer after her story. If it contained all that was important from the past, and it was enchanted, might it not go on to reveal the future?

His hands shook. Might it not speak of himself? Perhaps he could dispel the sudden deep fear that had come over him by learning a little of his own future? He turned a page.

New pictures, bright gold and red, swirled on the page before him. As far as he could tell it was a passage about the heraldry of Rondar. He went on. He could find nothing of importance at first: the memoirs of a lord from one of the smaller Middle Lands, a series of poetic tales about ordinary folk and their farming and their seasons of life in southern Shand, the history of a forest —nothing with any mention of his name. He grew angry. He turned another page.

There was less writing on the new page, and more of what seemed to him to be a simple design. As he read on, though, he wondered —the design became darker and more intricate. Suddenly, and with a shock that stopped his heart for a moment, he read a name he knew. It was not his own. It was Syra's.

At first he could not read easily the words that he saw there: they seemed to be in a different language, and many of them were unfamiliar to him. Also they were written close together, with a predominance of blue and black on the page —some of the words were blurred. He strained his eyes in the firelight and candlelight to go on. He did not see her name again for a while —there was a description of a place,

somewhere he half-recognised from another tale. With another shock he realised that it was the Dawn Tower, and recalled that day when, in the Twisted Mirror, he had seen his sister riding that lonely road into the hills, and his vision of her evil that had followed. He had forgotten that —the events of his own life had crowded it out of his mind. Now he wondered at it and peered down the page.

He read of the Mirror and of how Syra had allowed herself to be ensnared by it, finding it hidden in the High Houses, becoming a puppet pulled by dark strings. He read on, but did not want to believe what he read: tales of evil deeds, and shadows, and plots, and betrayal. How much of this was true, and how much was the mere report of travellers and gossips? Had Tarazion written this? He could not tell. The words in the book rang with the same authority as they had done in the tale of his mother, and they echoed his vision. Some of it he knew to be true —the invasion of the Reavers, Anyae's final stand, and the return of the Taran host from the Dark Isles in triumph at the last instant.

Then he read on. The tale now dwelt on times quite recent, the months since he had left Tara to the mercy of the Reavers. It told of Syra's crowning as Queen of Tara, and her greeting of the Prince of Turgal, Baladac, on the steps of the High Houses. Tara was conquered, then: he read of the hosts coming ashore from the Dark Isles and Turgal, and of the purges that Syra had ordered of all those loyal to himself or his mother. He wept. It could not all be true, not all of it. Was she not his sister, his own blood? He read of greater evils done there, some of which were too dark for his mind. He hoped, after a while, that what he read was in some way an

enchanted prophecy of what was yet to come, something that perhaps could be changed and prevented from happening, but he feared that it was not so. He wanted to stop reading. But he could not. He read on, coming to the end of a page.

Then suddenly he cried out and fell back —for what he had just read had hit him like a blow. He picked himself up and stood there unmoving for several minutes, going over and over it in his mind. Syra —Baladac —Gon-runin. Three names linked together: but as part of a plot so sinister that it chilled his blood.

Syra was to be wed to Baladac —the Heir to the High Throne was to marry the Prince of Turgal. But the marriage was to take place in the Serpent Tower, was to be blessed by evil —and was to result in a child, Heir to Shand, Tara and Turgal, who was to be the embodied god Gon-runin himself: the gateway of that once-banished being back into the world of flesh. If that were to happen, all would be lost: no amount of swords would stop the tide of the new-born terror sweeping into and over all the lands of men and women, all the lands that had been called free. The world would descend into darkness; Raendu's Dream, which had created the world, would become a nightmare.

It was a vision too terrible for Arime. He collapsed near the fire, shivering. This was part of that terror, part of the great darkness in his own soul which he had felt a short while before. But his own sister? Mother of the Usurper? He felt ill. The fire, though he was now quite close to it, could not warm him.

She had beseeched the Dark Circle, the Morndred, to permit this to occur. He could not comprehend it. Why? Why

had she turned to evil? Was her life so dark? What had happened in her life that had so distorted her? The answer to the question came before he had finished asking it in his own mind: the same darkness that had overcome his mother and made her seek and use the Jewel; the same darkness that he had felt within himself. His mother had defied it at the end—Syra had not, not yet. As for himself, he could not say. Whatever this blackness of the spirit was in his own heart, he was not yet strong enough to either accept or deny it. It paralysed him. He could not think or move, but crouched shivering before the fire.

He did not know how long he huddled there. All that ran through his mind was a continual plea—he did not know for what, nor to whom. The fire burned very low, and most of the candles had gone out when he opened his eyes. The Warden was sitting quietly in the chair near the hearth.

‘Have you read enough?’ he said after a while.

Arime did not move for some time. Finally he managed to speak.

‘Why...why did you not tell me?’ he said, still crouched on the floor.

The Warden sighed.

‘Tell you of what?’ he said at last. ‘I am the guardian and Warden of this place, not your guardian; I am not your keeper but the keeper of many doors, opening onto many roads. I told you before that it was time for you to grow. Growing is not always either easy nor painless. What have you read?’

‘I read of my mother,’ Arime replied, staggering to his feet and sitting in a nearby chair. The chamber now seemed

deathly cold. The Warden groaned as he stood, as though his bones ached with it, and he dragged a small log to the fireplace and stirred the cinders to life.

‘What else?’ he said.

‘I... I read on, after that,’ muttered Arime. ‘I read of Syra, and... and what is planned for her. Is it true? Or is it yet to happen? Might we yet stop it?’

‘We?’ said the old man.

Arime fell silent, watching the fire slowly surround the log and begin to consume it. He felt so tired. And a new terrible feeling of loneliness grew on him. It was not a loneliness based on knowledge that companionship was attainable, but for some reason not yet attained— this was a deeper fear, a real fear of being alone, forever, lost in a void without end or meaning, where companionship was forever impossible. He pushed it from his mind.

‘I do not know what to do,’ he said.

‘Well, that is where the wisest journeys begin,’ said the Warden. Firelight had begun to warm the walls and tables near them again. ‘Time for you to rest, I would think, before any more is done. Tall and strong warriors have quailed and fainted reading the Book of Seven, though no more nor less than the simple truth is written there. We shall talk more of this later. Come!’

He stood and guided Arime out of the Library and up the stairs again, back to the room where Arime had first awoken at Wenfold. Arime went unquestioningly, like a horse led to its stable. His mind was blank. He sank into the bed, and was asleep before he knew it.

As far as Arime could recall, he had had no dreams in that sleep, but when he woke he saw someone standing before him—not the Warden, nor Tarazion, nor Lonia: it was a boy, somewhat younger than himself—but the boy's skin was darker, a deep red-brown colour, and he seemed almost naked. He looked at Arime, smiling broadly, white teeth glinting in the firelight like his shining eyes. Some kind of coronet flashed across his brow, Arime thought. The boy spoke:

'My name is Bettan. I watched you from a tree when you first came to the Well. My master the Warden bade me watch you until you awoke, and to tell you that you are to come with me to the Hall of Dining once you are awake.'

Bettan's voice had a musical lilt, and he spoke with a different dialect to the one Arime used, but his cheery manner made Arime smile, and he got up and was dressed quickly.

Outside the room, bright light filled the corridor. Arime was not used to sunlight, even indirectly, and blinked, pausing.

'Come, come!' said Bettan, dancing around him. 'Your friends wait! Especially the girl!'

Arime was led through many doors and down many passages until he came into a large stone kitchen. Here, for the first time, was a window that he could look out of. He glimpsed trees and far-off hills, shining in golden sunlight. His eyes grew used to the light and he looked around the room. The Warden and Tarazion sat at a large wooden table; Lonia sat nearer the fire in a rocking chair. All around the room were the implements of a kitchen—pans, spoons, pots,

plates, large bowls and vegetables hanging from the walls and ceiling.

Arime felt shy. It seemed weeks since he had been in anyone's company. He was especially shy of Lonia, recalling his sharp words to her in the Library. The room seemed to contain too much life and light after his hours in the dark.

'Bettan has introduced himself?' said the Warden, rising and pouring something into a mug for Arime. 'He is my helper here at Wenfold —from far-off Vildon he comes, where the once-green northern woods now sleep under the snow all year round. Bettan, fetch what is left of breakfast for Arime. Our prince will be hungry, I should think.'

Arime was indeed ravenous, and said no more until he had eaten his fill of bread, honey, cheese, hot oats, and various other things that were placed before him rapidly by the light-footed Bettan.

When he had finished he sat back quietly in his chair. He felt physically contented, but was not yet prepared to recall his time in the Library. He looked at Lonia, but she was busy sewing a saddlecloth and did not look at him.

'Now,' began the Warden, 'you have been here for over a week, and outside winter and war lies over the world. My messengers bring me tales of woe almost too numerous to be recorded in the Book of Seven —each day they come from Shand, from Rondar, from the Middle Lands, even some from far-off Tara, and everywhere the tale is the same: bloodshed, dispossession, plague and disorder. Here at Wenfold, in the heart of the Guardians, protected by many secrets, you are safe —but we must now decide your course of action, for you cannot remain here for long. I welcome

guests and news, but this is not a guesthouse nor a sanctuary from the affairs of the world. Here you may be refreshed, but it is refreshment before the resumption of your quest, not escape. This, Tarazion knows. But he is guide, not master here. For the Sword can only be unsheathed by its rightful wielder, and you, Arime, are he.'

The sense of solitude came over Arime again —alone-ness, deeper than mere loneliness. He looked again at Lonia, but she was staring into the kitchen fire and did not turn to him. The wind began to blow outside, and a grey light signalled oncoming rain or snow.

'Is there any way,' he began at last, 'of coming to Tara in time to prevent the evil that I have seen in the book?'

The Warden looked over at Tarazion. For the first time Arime looked at them both together. The Warden seemed at first more ancient because of the deep whiteness of his beard and brows; but Tarazion was more weather-beaten: his was a face which had seen many frosts and storms, which had walked into many winds, and looked upon much. The Warden's was a listening face, a face that would take in, look at, understand and speak back that which you told it, a face boundless in its gentleness, bottomless in its patience; Tarazion's was a face of command, one that would pierce veils, push behind secrets, confront darkness, and speak to the gods of a storm. Neither seemed stronger or weaker than the other —simply different. But there was something in common between them, too. Arime searched for it. It was something deep in their eyes, their grim smiles. He looked on Tarazion's face with a new wisdom. Theirs were both faces that had denied the darkness he himself still felt within. That

shapeless fear which was like the night between the stars had been conquered there.

Arime had then a new thought. If it had been conquered there, did not that mean that it could be conquered? He did not say to himself 'And therefore that I can conquer it myself'—somehow that was not a necessary step in his mind. Simply that it could be beaten successfully—that was all, that was enough. He listened to Tarazion.

'That road could be walked, but the deed at the end left undone,' he was saying. 'For how would you stop the evil? Tara is an occupied land, and Baladac and your sister are protected by company after company of arms and by many walls. Do not think to appeal to your sister with words! She has gone beyond that. If you would take my counsel, we must walk the road to the Sword, and thence wherever else that road may lead.'

Arime looked away.

'Where is that road?' he said after a while.

The Warden spoke:

'I am the Keeper of many doors, as I have said. One of them is not far from here. It is perhaps the most fearful of all the doors in my keeping, for it lies at the beginning of the road to the Underworld. On that road lies the Sword Sundergost.'

'But not at its end,' added Tarazion.

'The road to the Underworld?' said Arime. 'Do you mean that it leads under the earth? Beneath the mountains?'

Tarazion nodded.

'Long is the road, and hard for mortal hearts,' he said, 'for it is without the sun or wind, or the sound of birds or trees.'

And perilous are the things upon it, for it leads into that terrible realm of old: the kingdom of the Dragons, the land that stretches beneath the Sunken Land, deeper than deep.'

'Is it a journey in darkness, then?' asked Arime, shivering.

'Nay, I will not say there is no light—but it is not the light of the world you were born in. True darkness, though, is brought thither in the heart,' said Tarazion.

Arime thought for a while. He wished Lonia would look at him. Rain began to dash fiercely against the window of the kitchen.

'Then the Sword lies with the Dragons under the earth,' he said at last, 'that much is now clear to me, from your words and the ancient tales. It was placed there by the Herald of Raendu after Valkurn the High King died in the Battle of the Free, over a thousand years ago. But did not the Dragons prophesy that the Herald would come before them again when the Sword was sought anew? For without him, how can we hope to triumph? I am but a man! One man against the whole of history and the darkness. Where is the Herald of Raendu?'

Lonia looked up then at the mention of the Sword, as he had hoped she would. Their eyes met. She looked away. He did not know what had transpired in that brief instant, but it gave him new strength. The winter wind whistled outside.

'Darkness lies between and beyond the stars,' said Tarazion. 'It is not our part to change Raendu's Dream, but to follow the road he has made for us through that darkness, or not—helping to extinguish what light remains, or standing with us, the bearers of the last torch, as night closes in. Which road will you choose?'

Arime froze to the spot as Tarazion stared at him from his chair. The fire crackled and spat. Outside the storm lashed the windows.

‘That is the choice that lies before you, Arime,’ he said, after a long silence had passed. ‘That has always been the choice, plain and straight: good and evil, light and dark. I have said to you before that you must choose. Now that you have read part of the Book of Seven, perhaps your choice will be wiser, and swifter. As to the Herald of Raendu —I do not need magic to call him up. The Dragons said that a Herald would come again. There is more than one Herald. All through time Raendu summons to himself those mortals to whom he has revealed his will. Would that we could call upon Estran, whom Valkurn called Herald of Raendu, Child of the Mountain, Rider of Unicorns, Dweller in the Deep, he who summoned the High King with Gulinol, Horn of Garmon, who journeyed beneath the earth and witnessed the death of Valasne and her Serpent-King! But it is not to be. His time has gone. Now I am he who they prophesied would walk the floor of their Hall again: I am the Herald of Raendu.’

Tarazion stood, and grew so large and dark and menacing that Arime collapsed before him: his beard seemed to burn with flame, his one eye shone. He was suddenly like a figure written in the Book of Seven who had leapt from the page, taller and brighter than anything in the ordinary world of daylight. Arime trembled.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and heard a voice.

‘Get up, boy.’

He slowly stood, and fell into a chair. Tarazion looked like

an ordinary man again. Arime remembered the tears he had once seen in the other's eye. He took a deep breath.

'I-I'm sorry,' he stammered, 'I see now. I read it in the book — you are the Herald, you said so to my mother.'

'Do you see?' said Tarazion, quietly. 'Then that's more than I do. I know only that there is a road —I do not know where it leads. Perhaps to all our deaths. Certainly away from my own son, whom I love and miss. But if we are to die, then let us make our deaths count for something by following this road to the end and being guided by such wisdom as Raendu provides.'

'What is your true name?' asked Arime.

'I am called Maranain of Rondar —a Seer, they said in that distant land, one who could heal and who saw visions in the waters of pools. Would that I had seen further! But in truth I did not look. I sought Ryna too late, finding her only in time to save her own soul, in the Wood, as you have read yourself. She gave up Sterreth at the last, before it consumed her. Do you see, Arime? If she had not given it up, it would have eaten her, and she would have been Baladac's bride in your sister's stead —you would have been usurped by the Usurper himself!

'As it was, the enemy was forestalled. He had Syra in his grip, though, already. I had to return to Tara to protect you from her, and to try and open the doors of her mind —but she held them closed against me, and wove new shadows so that I could not see all that lay therein. She had already looked in the Mirror. Thus was I almost too slow again, and we only escaped just in time from Tara.

'You should call me Tarazion still, which means "wise man

of Tara" —for my life as Maranain I have left behind me — but I have not been too wise, Arime. I almost let you perish in the wilderness, and it was only the love that Lonia bore you which saved you. But that is off the way of my lord and master, Raendu: for, though since Aradu wrested the Dream from him there has been great darkness, in the night there are stars, and in the wilderness, love. Even Wunderalga's anguish led to your release —and there was love unlooked for certainly. So our road lies through an infinite night. We must be guided by the torches we alone bear, and trust to Raendu.

'Of Syra, who can say? I do not know if you will see her again, or if, seeing her, you will be able to reach her soul. I know only that "Often do all the houses one must visit lie on the same road," as they say in Shand.'

The Warden poured a fresh goblet of wine for Arime and he sipped at it.

'Take me to the Door,' he said.

THE GREEN ROAD

*When Valkurn the Valiant knocked on
That Door, dreaming Dragons deeper than
The sea stirred in sleep, sensing the summons
Of doom drawing nigh.*

-from The Song of Valkurn

It was the middle of winter in the lands outside the Guardian Mountains. Deep in the valley of Wenfold in their heart, however, it seemed that autumn lingered still. The Warden showed Arime something of that place over the next few days: it was a vast, rambling, underground city, he sometimes thought, extending beyond even the Warden's knowledge, deep beneath the glens and slopes of the hills; but it was not like a city in parts, more like a huge house. Just when he thought he had reached the beginning of echoing halls that were really more like caverns of stone under the peaks of mountains, he would find a quiet room with a fireplace and window or skylight letting in fresh sunlight, opening off a corridor that seemed made for giants; and then, opening a narrow door that seemed as though it would lead to no more than a cupboard, he would find himself stepping into a cathedral-like space of arching rock, carved and full of dancing shadows in the light of a few candles. It was hard to grasp what the place was —it defied all attempts to name it, just like the Warden himself. Was it haunted by ancient spirits? At times he thought so —no dwelling so vast could be really as empty as his mere eyes told him. And yet part of

its great sadness was its emptiness. He wondered who had built it, and why. He asked the Warden, as they walked down a deep passage to a crypt-like chamber which was full of candles and cobwebs.

'Many hands have contributed to Wenfold over many years. Who knows which was the first?' the old man said, guarding the torch they carried from a sudden draught. 'I think the first halls were made even before the Dragons came—certainly they were here when I first took on this Wardenship, and that was many ages ago. Then came the Nine Races, and each left a mark; and then, when the Land of Living Light fell, and the Wandering Time began, who knows what dwelt here? In the beginning there were halls enough for whole peoples to dwell in without their paths having to cross. Some of them have collapsed now—all of them are empty. Only Bettan and I dwell here now—at least, as far as I know,' he added with a smile.

Arime looked around at the dusty, half-forgotten chamber. The sadness seemed tangible in the candlelight.

'Why?' he whispered. 'Why have they gone? And who keeps the candles and fires alight?'

The Warden sighed his deep sigh.

'I know not why,' he said, 'unless my heart tells me aright: for the world grows harder over the centuries, and there is no place for somewhere like Wenfold in the lands of men, I fear. Wenfold is a staying place, a place of stillness—the world around it moves faster every day. Soon even the rooms that are open now will be closed and forgotten, and dust and cobwebs will cover all. I keep the candles lit and the fires burning, with Bettan's help. I do not completely know why.'

Perhaps I hope one day to open the door to Wenfold's children: but today, as I have said, there is no sanctuary here for mortals, for the world's motion spins them on swifter than they see—they have no time to sit and study the Great Books or look out from windows on this forgotten landscape. Wenfold stays while the world passes it by. Such is their choice.'

They went on, climbing a narrow staircase that led into a stone chamber, cold and bare. In the centre of the room was a large hole in the floor, ten feet across. Above it in the grey ceiling the hole extended upwards into darkness. Arime knew without asking that this was the Well itself, dropping through the chamber into bottomless night. There was a quiet drip of water somewhere below them. He crept closer to the edge, but could see nothing.

'Is it truly bottomless?' he asked in a whisper.

The Warden shrugged. 'Can anything be truly bottomless in this world, Arime? People have liked to think so. But even Raendu's Dream must have edges. I think not, but I do not know how deep it is. Sometimes noises can be heard in the deepest depths—noises too faint to grasp, but they are not water noises. Remember, the realm of the Dragons lies under all these lands.'

Arime shivered.

'But the Dragons are dead, are they not?' he asked.

The Warden stroked his beard, thinking.

'Perhaps so. Certainly I have not seen one for a long time. Let us hope so, for the sake of mortals,' he said.

'Are they as perilous as the old tales say, then?' asked Arime.

‘Certainly,’ answered the Warden at once. ‘Perilous in more ways than one. Their chief peril is not even that they bring a swift death by fire or claw or tooth to most living things that cross their path: that is their lesser evil, for the spirit can survive death. There are some things the spirit can find even harder than that: madness, despair, terror, the uncreation of things. The Dragons belong to a world that was never meant to mix with ours, Arime —and their release into the world of the sun was one of the greatest evils committed in the long tale of the world. It is an evil which even now we strive to heal. Sundergost is part of that.’

‘How?’

The Warden led them on before he answered. They climbed out of the stone chamber and through a large hall to an open door. Arime felt air on his face, fresh, outside air, and pale winter sunlight cast its sheen over a rocky, green glen that lay beyond the threshold of the door. They walked a little way down a steep path between bracken and under bare winter branches, and came to the bottom of the glen. At its centre stood a small stone structure, partly collapsed, green with thick moss. It covered a deep hole in the ground.

‘Here is Wenfold Well, as most travellers see it —but not many travel this road now, and of those that do, even fewer see more than this. You are honoured, Arime, though you may not know it. You have seen more of my home than many a mortal pilgrim.’

Arime looked around at the quiet trees. A robin and some other bird he could not quite make out were dancing in the branches on the other side of the glen. The faint music of a stream could be heard in the distance. Arime did indeed feel

honoured —but it was the reserved honour of a youth admitted to the rooms of his elders after many years outside, an honour which came with as yet unplumbed obligations.

‘You spoke of Sundergost?’ he said at last.

The Warden sat down wearily on an outcropping of mossy stone and nodded.

‘Sundergost was made from a fragment of the tooth of the father of Dragons, which served the gods in their battle against the Disturber of the Dream. The Dragons are therefore as much bound up with it as mortal men. Though it is a weapon, the greatest blade ever forged, its prime purpose is to heal, not destroy —to heal that great rift between the parts of Raendu’s Dream which were unlawfully mixed long ago. Your quest is a greater one than the salvation of Shand and the lands of men, as I believe you are beginning to see. That is what Tarazion means when he says that the Sword lies on the road but not at its end —recovering Sundergost is only the first step. When you hold it in your hands, Raendu grant that you may see how it is to be used, for he seeks continually to heal his Dream. The Sword was made to defy darkness and restore things to their proper place —let us hope that it is not too late to do both. Releasing it into the world, though, will change many things. It must be used wisely.’

‘Surely, though, Tarazion will know what to do? Is he not as he says, the Herald of Raendu?’ Arime asked.

The Warden smiled again. His smiles were deeper and somehow kinder than the smiles of Tarazion, as though free from the hurt which Arime felt Tarazion carried with him.

‘The habit of youth dies hard,’ the Warden said. ‘You still

look to your elders for the decisions —and I suppose that is understandable, and indeed often wise. Tarazion has seen much, felt much. He has been burned and wounded while I have not: but will he see the road through the darkness into which you must go? Perhaps. Certainly he is the best guide in all Gandria to have on such a journey. But if he does not see it? What then? Are you prepared to see it for him?’

Arime looked down into the darkness of the Well. He did not know whether he was prepared or not, nor whether the old man expected him to answer that question. He looked up.

‘When must we go?’ he asked.

‘As soon as you are able. You have rested now, but you must eat and rest a little more —you will need all your strength for the journey, for it must of necessity be on foot, and it is hard on the spirit. I would say in two days’ time, all will be ready. But is there anything else you desire of me before we return to the others?’

Arime found himself speaking before he knew it. He did not know where the question came from —it was not what he had intended to say.

‘Warden, why is it that all those I love leave me? Is there something within me which drives them all away, or... or destroys them?’

The Warden turned slightly and looked at him with great interest.

‘All?’ he said.

‘My mother left me when I was so young that I can scarcely remember her; then I was left with Syra, but she has gone beyond my love into evil, and hates me; then Lonia,

who says she loves me, nearly died in the wilderness because of my folly and my broken oath. Why is this? Am I to find peace in this?’

The Warden paused.

‘Tell me more of this,’ he said at last, ‘for there is more, is there not?’

Arime had thought not, but he looked. He recalled his mother’s words of the Jewel Sterreth and the nightmares it had given her. She had found her way back to the right road at the end, but her passage had been hard-won. He shivered.

‘I feel there is a darkness around me, like a shroud. No one can reach me through it. If they try, they will be chilled or burned. It is easier for them to leave me. I cannot see the light through it sometimes. Sometimes this darkness makes me... break oaths, and other dark things,’ he said quietly.

‘This darkness,’ said the Warden, gently, ‘is it your own, do you think, or does it surround others, also?’

Arime thought for a while.

‘I do not know,’ he said. ‘It is hard to say if others have it or if I see only my own shadow around them. My mother felt the whole world to be dark in her youth —and yet she wrote that it was not so, at the end. Which is it?’

‘Look and see,’ the Warden said. ‘Do others’ lives truly revolve around your own? Is your shadow so big that it can cloak them all?’

‘It is very big,’ said Arime.

‘How big?’

Arime looked into the far distance.

‘From here to the Wood of Seven,’ he said. ‘No beyond that. Warden, it seems to cover the world —Shand, Tara, all

the lands! How can anyone come near to me through that?' He felt tears rising in him, and hardly knew what he was saying.

'Would a High King have a smaller shadow?' said the Warden very quietly. Arime looked at him suddenly. His mind reined in the grief that had been rearing up in him like an unleashed beast. It was still there, straining, but he had it for the moment in his hands.

'Do not say to me that I can conquer this shadow,' he said, his voice shaking, 'for it is too big for me, this I swear. I cannot reach Lonia through it, or my mother. It fills me with dread. It drove my mother away —I would not have it do the same with Lonia.'

'So you have kept your distance somewhat from her,' the Warden went on. 'But is it not hard to keep love at bay in such a way? Did you not warm to her on your journey?'

'Yes, yes. On the moors —it was a great melting of ice somewhere within me, but...'

'But since then you have frozen over again?' the Warden said.

'Time caught up with us,' Arime said. 'It was too brief. And I have since grown afraid again to approach her.'

'It was the seasons, then, that froze over your heart, and not yourself?' asked the Warden, but Arime did not understand him. The old man went on. 'Answer me the question I asked, if you can: do the lives of those around you revolve as though you were the light in all their existences? Is this Shadow that you feel your own, cast by your presence? Or is it otherwise?'

'These questions are too large,' Arime said.

The Warden paused, and looked along the length of his walking stick, which he carried everywhere with him, nodding slowly.

‘Nevertheless,’ he said after a moment, ‘you must answer them, for your own sake. I asked you earlier if you would see the road ahead where Tarazion did not —it may be the same question.’

Arime thought deeply for a long while. Darkneses and shapeless thoughts were spinning in his mind; weightier matters than he was used to thinking about so steadily swung before his inner eye. The air grew cold as the sun began to sink over the mountains to the west, and a chill breeze sprang up in the leafless branches. Faint traces of cloud brushed across the tops of the pine forests he could see far up in the valleys of the mountains to the north.

‘I think if I say that it is I who cast the shadow over all, you will think me foolish and small-hearted. And yet I cannot say for sure whether others feel as I do, and bear their own darkness. What is the right answer? Or is it all folly?’ he said at last.

‘Folly?’ said the Warden. ‘It is not folly, that is certain. No thought or image in the minds of mortals is truly folly —only when it stands revealed to another can it sometimes appear so. We stand on the edge of a greatness, just as you stand near the threshold of the great door in your quest. These things are not unrelated, Arime. The darkness in your heart and the darkness of the world are intertwined.’

‘But do you understand me?’ Arime said, turning urgently towards the old man where he sat unmoving on the stone. ‘Can you understand this... this shadow that I speak of? Or

am I now more a child in your eyes than ever?’

‘You have never been a child in my eyes,’ said the Warden. ‘Nor are your deepest fears unknown to me. I understand your words only too well. You feel what all feel who dwell within the Dream of the World. You long to wake, but have forgotten what waking is. You are haunted endlessly. You, your mother, even Lonia—all were or are under the shadow of life. It is a real thing, on that you can depend. The question is, where shall the light be found?’

‘What then is the answer?’ Arime said, almost dreading the old man’s reply.

‘To walk the road that is put before us—to its end. To face the darkness and run from it no more. To heal the Dream and awake from it—or descend into an ever-troubled sleep, like death. One road leads to the true light; all other roads are shadowed.’

Arime was quiet for a while more.

‘All speech, like all roads, seem to lead to this Door of yours,’ he said at last. ‘I almost wish I could leave at once and get the whole journey finished as quickly as might be. I am very afraid, Warden.’

The old man stood up and came to him, placing a hand on his arm, and said nothing.

Two days later the Warden and Bettan had finished helping them prepare large packs of supplies, and he had told all that he knew of the Underworld and what they must expect to find there—utterly strange and wondrous it seemed to Arime and Lonia, barely taken in by them, though Tarazion nodded grimly at most of it, as if remembering.

Most of their arrangements had been made in silence. It seemed that the Door of which the Warden spoke was not far from Wenfold and that they would reach it before that day was over. Even Tarazion seemed quiet, and the boy Bettan danced around them but appeared to respect their mood and did not try to be jovial or merry as he adjusted leather straps and straightened cloaks.

‘You will most likely not need your cloaks for some of the journey,’ said the Warden, ‘for though it is winter in the world above, beneath the earth there are other seasons. But do not groan at the weight of your packs, for soon enough they will be too empty for your stomachs. Go sparingly with food; water you will find from time to time. In the depths, take care — there is a dragonwater which is not made for mortals to drink much of.’

‘I have walked this road before,’ said Tarazion, hoisting a giant pack onto his shoulders.

The Warden smiled.

‘My friend, do I not know it?’ he said. ‘But here is news that none of you yet know. Word has reached me here of deeds in the lands of men: war rages in the Middle Lands; Helca has fought the Turgalin host at Stonehammer’s Seat, with Colomain of Rondar at his side. The battle was fought for two days —but it was lost by Shand and her allies.’

‘And what of Helca?’ asked Lonia.

‘I have no news,’ the Warden told her, gripping her shoulder. ‘But it is likely that he escaped. Stonehammer’s Seat was not surrounded, and Baladac, the Prince of Turgal, is a rash warrior —he will have been over-eager and foolish. Nevertheless, it seems the enemy does not wait for the

winter. Mayhap Baladac will rule Shand before spring. It is evil news, I know, but it may spur you on your journey.'

Arime's heart felt colder than ever —the news of war did nothing to spur him. At that moment, he felt that their whole quest was foolish and aimless. He looked around at the grey kitchen in which they stood. In his brief time at Wenfold he had come to regard it as a home, and he wished he did not have to leave. Flashing through his mind there came the sudden thought that he would refuse to go, that he would abandon the duties that others had thrust upon him, that he would plead with the Warden to stay here, far from strife. But the thought was as sunlight on a deep-running stream, and passed as quickly as it had come. He stared into the large fireplace. Lonia was also watching the flames, thinking of her father, he knew, whom she had perhaps lost forever. He knew what that loss felt like, he thought. His heart went out to her, but he still withheld himself and remained where he was. Tarazion was speaking.

'Lead us on, Warden. I would be gone before more such news arrives. What we have to do is dark enough.'

The Warden nodded, and he and Bettan led them out of the kitchen and down a long stone passage which opened out into a courtyard hidden by trees. They went through a gate in the green wall that surrounded that place, and down a narrow path through thick bushes and bracken. The morning sun was just climbing above the mountaintops when they reached a small stream running across their path. They helped each other across and then continued down into a small valley.

The sunlight on the stark branches, a few birds in the

barren trees, the patches of grey winter grass, and the steady dripping of water in the woods through which they walked made Arime feel drowsy, and he lost his count of the time. It was already most of the way through the afternoon before they stooped under a huge oak branch and stepped out into a clearing at the foot of a cliff face which seemed to rear up from where they stood right into the clouds at the top of the peaks above. Arime was hot and tired. They had eaten while they walked, and though they had not walked quickly, his feet ached. He looked around.

In the face of the stone before which they stood was a door. It was twice the height of a man, curving in an arch over their heads. It was overgrown with moss, but appeared to be made of wood, and painted green—or perhaps the wood itself was green. He thought of the door to the Carthog's crypt in the far-off Wood of Seven, and shivered. But this door was not so lightly made. It looked as though it was at least as old as the mountain into whose face it was driven. Perhaps it had stood there alone, a door to nowhere, before the mountain had risen at its back. A silence filled all that woodland glade. The Warden turned to them, and pointed to it with his walking stick.

'This is the Green Door, the Door to the Underworld. It is not the only way to that dark realm, but it is one which has remained open for an age, and it is your best chance.'

'Open the Door,' said Tarazion.

The Warden pulled out a long key from his white robes. It glinted bright silver in the winter light. He brushed away some of the moss and put it into the Door. It turned easily, and with a heavy movement of falling moss and earth the

Door opened onto a pit of blackness. Though the westering sun shone some way into that opening, it did not light much beyond the threshold.

'Here you would do well to carry torches, at least for a while,' said the Warden, and Bettan, who had brought several with him, lit three for them. They took one each and stowed the rest. Tarazion moved towards the threshold, sniffing the air. Arime noticed the anxiety on his companion's brow. Tarazion turned away from the Door to the Warden, and smiled grimly.

'Well, old friend,' he said quietly, 'either we now prove to be dotards, dreaming idle dreams while the world groans and perishes, or our deepest wishes will come to pass and our tasks will finally be done. I would that we could both rest in the Land of Stars, or look out upon the world from the White Tower.'

The Warden embraced him and Arime thought he saw fleeting tears in both their faces.

'Perhaps we will meet there yet,' said the Warden. 'You will be in my heart always, my friend.'

He turned to Arime and Lonia.

'I will not lock the Door behind you. This is not an imprisonment. The fact that you are free to walk back on the road may give you the courage to go on, moreso than if you knew you were locked in. This quest we do not lay on either of you, for though your births may seem to have brought you to it, a mortal may change the course of a mountain torrent with a wish, and it is yours to deny. Say now: do you walk this road freely, with a good heart, though it be to an unknown end?'

Arime had no courage for words: he nodded. The Warden looked at him for a moment, then turned to Lonia.

'I follow Arime,' she said.

'So be it! May you fare well, and may you reach the end of the road you walk, and find Raendu!' said the Warden, and he raised his hand in a sign of blessing. They stepped up to the threshold.

'Goodbye!' called Bettan, as they took their first steps into the darkness. 'I hope to see you again! There is much at Wenfold to share with you!'

Arime could find no words still. He stepped forward doggedly. After they had gone forward a few paces, the weak sunlight from the doorway had already faded and torchlight flickered all about them. Tarazion paused and looked back. The Warden closed the Door behind them with a soft, heavy noise, and it was dark but for the torches.

It was also silent in the passage except for their faint sputtering. No air moved there, and it was cold. The rough floor sloped downwards, but there was no room for even two to walk abreast, and Tarazion went first, followed by Lonia and then Arime. They walked on for some hours, always down, always cold, always with the dancing flames of their torches before them, and nothing changed. The cold of the air had at first woken Arime from his drowsiness, but the pack on his back was heavy and his legs were tired, and he was glad when Tarazion stopped.

The dark corridor stretched on in the blackness, beyond the light they carried. Tarazion put out all but one of the torches and they ate a small, cold meal sitting on the damp floor of the tunnel.

'I forget the Warden's words. How long is the journey?' asked Lonia in a whisper.

Tarazion looked up from his thought.

'Time is different, under the earth,' he said at last. 'Perhaps it will be spring in the lands of men before we see the sun again. But we will see other lights.'

Arime shivered. He wondered if the food would last.

'Was this passage made by men?' he asked suddenly.

'Aye,' said Tarazion, 'but men of the ancient world dug to find the riches of the sunken Dragonrealm. They would have been disappointed: the riches of Dragons are not those of men, as we may see.'

'I also cannot bring to mind all that the Warden told us. Does the tunnel go on like this all the way?' Arime went on.

'Nay, it soon comes to caverns —huge caverns, beyond the mind, let alone the hand, of any man, carved by vanished seas or ancient rivers now dry. This tunnel then disappears —and like as not any that first came down here with it disappeared also in the great labyrinth of those places. You shall see wonders, Arime, wonders not meant for mortal eyes. Your ancestor was enchanted by them. He never forgot the Caves of the Underworld, they say.'

Arime paused in his questions, thinking of his ancestor Valkurn the High King, and how he had walked that way an age before with another Herald. Time and the overwhelming weight of stone all around him dwarfed his mind, and he fell into a troubled sleep, along with the others.

They went on when they awoke —on and on, into the darkness under the mountains. The caverns that Tarazion

had spoken of were forgotten in the slow, plodding tread of that endless tunnel. There was no way of knowing how long they walked before they again paused, ate, and rested. Time was indeed different in that sunless night. They had to trust to Tarazion's judgement of distance and the passing of the hours, but it seemed to Arime nevertheless that the days—or the periods between times of sleep, for there was no sign of daylight—were growing shorter. He tried to keep track of the number of times they had slept since the Door had closed behind them, but the sameness of the tunnel, the flickering torches and the plodding feet before him deluded him, and he gave it up. His mind slowly emptied of anything else but the cold grey walls of that passage—he could not think of the future or the past, or fear anything, or long for anything. He simply walked, and ate, and slept, and walked again, for the most part in silence.

There came a time—and already it was to him not a time in the same sense as he had thought of time before—when they were no longer in the tunnel. It was perhaps a week or two weeks since they had started. Their packs were already feeling lighter. They heard the sound ahead of running water in the darkness and crossed a stream—the water seemed black like ink to Arime—and suddenly emerged into a wider space. The walls of the tunnel vanished, the roof leapt upward, and the firelight showed them a massive chamber, its far walls out of sight. Except for the faint trickle of the stream, echoing in the vault, nothing could be heard. Arime breathed deeply of the still, cold air—he felt as though he had been wrapped in a cold shawl for days. They did not pause in the cavern, however, but went on, directly ahead,

across a floor that was strewn with hulking shapes of washed rock and patches of fine sand. Arime's boots sank into the sand as he walked; he watched Lonia's boots doing the same in front of him. The change of scenery seemed so vast to him that he was amazed by its finest detail —and yet, before long, they had reached the other side of the cave and passed under an arch, and the cavern was gone.

The new tunnel was different —it began to wind, and it was wider in parts. The roof also dipped occasionally, and then shot upwards again, out of sight. They were walking on sand at the bottom of a deep cleft in the centre of a mountain. The floor sloped down more steeply now, and sometimes they slid for a few feet in the loose sand, and Arime had to steady himself on the rock wall as he walked.

They went on and on, through cavern after cavern, deeper and deeper under the world. After what seemed like many days of this, but might have been weeks, they came to a point where they had to remove their packs and crawl head first into a hole into darkness. Neither Arime nor Lonia liked it —but the fear was dulled by the fact that they had slowly forgotten what it was like to live in the world of light above the mountains, and the surrounding stone formed the limit of their waking thought. It was not a long journey through the hole —they emerged unscathed onto a broad ledge. And here the first real wonder was waiting to greet them.

The first thing Arime noticed as he crawled forward through the dusty hole was the noise —a deep, continuous booming like falling water. Then he felt heat ahead of him, a warm breeze full of tingling smells. He had pulled himself out and stood with Lonia and Tarazion on the ledge. Then he

had noticed that the light around them was not torchlight.

On their right, a vast cliff fell away from their feet into a rich blackness. On their left the cliff continued upwards into a rocky roof beyond sight. The wide ledge wound away ahead of them. A red glow, weaker than the torchlight to which he had become accustomed, shone on the underside of endlessly rising clouds of steam, billowing up hypnotically from the void at the bottom of the cliff. The clouds disappeared into the sky of stone above. Peering cautiously over the edge of the cliff he saw a bright ribbon of burning rock moving like a slithering, golden snake across a black floor. Somewhere far below where they stood, an unseen subterranean river met liquid rock in an eternal embrace, sending the pale, red clouds upwards forever. He swooned. Tarazon steadied him, and they stepped back from the edge. It was all too vast, too old, too deep, for Arime's tired mind. He followed the others as they went on ahead along the ledge.

The thunder of the steam and the river of burning rock was soon left behind. The ledge on which they walked suddenly burrowed into the cliff on their left, turned a corner and they were gone.

The air grew cold again, but the tunnel in which they now walked was not dark. Pale green light glowed on its rough walls, not reflected from their torches, which Tarazon now put out. It seemed as if the rock itself glowed, but when he touched it, Arime felt only cold stone. They went on, winding in a now-level tunnel deep into the rock.

Day after day —or what passed for day in that world— they walked on, speaking little, eating gradually less and less

as their packs grew lighter. Arime estimated that they had enough food to last for seven more periods of waking. He had not thought of the return journey till then, and he began to wonder if Tarazion were leading them to a deep grave at the end of the road. But, as they went along the featureless tunnel, he did not voice his thought—and something began to happen to him. The thought, like a seed, began to slowly grow, hidden in his innermost mind. It drew on the waters of idleness that had formed in his thinking as they had walked along and down with nothing around him but stone: he thought of graves, and burial at the end of life, and how all mortals died and were placed beneath the earth. Why was this? Why had he not seen before that all those living return to the earth at the end of their short lives? But the scratches in the surface where they were buried were feeble attempts to sink to the true realms beneath, realms through which he now walked while alive. He walked through the land of death, his thought saying: Arime, High King of many mortal realms, was now buried beneath unimaginably vast stone in the heart of the earth, to which all mortals aspired to return when their life was done.

He thought of the fiery river and the endlessly rising steam—there was no meaning in it, nothing for the mind of a man to hold onto. That steam rose far beyond the sight of any man, as it had always risen, as it always would rise, whether men came there or not. This was what all mortal dreams and lives came to in the end—limitless nothingness, an emptiness weighted with featureless stone, shot through with slow, molten streams which would burn flesh in an instant. This was the end of life, then, this was the earth, this

was the substance beneath all of Gandria. What did the kingdoms of men, the marriages, the great deeds, the rearing of children, the wisdom of women, the beauty of life itself, mean before this great weight of rock? And Tarazion was leading them deep into the heart of it, beyond hope of return. They would find no Sword here, they would find nothing made for the hand of a man in that terrible, immortal place.

Arime had forgotten the Green Door, the Warden, Restonia and Tara, his sister and even his mother. They seemed like mere pictures in his head, insubstantial, weightless. All that was and would be echoed around him to the fall of his own feet: chamber after chamber of stone. The seed continued to grow. They walked for many miles more —walked, ate, slept, walked, on and on through the earth. Chamber after chamber passed him by, but he hardly saw them.

He thought of the shadow in his soul, the loneliness, the terror. And now —of course, it was obvious to him now— he clearly saw that that had been merely an echo, a faint reflection, of the real thing. Firstly there had been the darkness of his chamber as a child, the despair that had come to him when he cried out after dreaming of his mother; but that had been nothing compared to this, the deep night of the earth, the solitude without meaning, the emptiness in which all thought shrank to such smallness that the only feeling possible was fear. This was the real thing: or, at least, he was approaching the true darkness now, led unerringly in that direction by the man who had been leading him to it all along. The Sword was a dream.

He was falling behind Lonia. She was about to disappear around a corner in the tunnel. It did not matter. Nothing

mattered. It was not even really significant that he was afraid: that was simply the way things were and would be from now on. He slowed his pace. Lonia rounded the bend ahead, not looking back. The faint green glow of the walls now seemed very faint indeed. He felt very tired. This was to be his grave, then. It was not marked or different in any way to any other part of the tunnel. Why should it be? He was a small creature, unworthy of any special place. He would sleep now. Let the blackness swallow him forever. He wanted no more struggle with it, he wanted to rest.

‘Arime!’ said Tarazion, standing over him.

Arime jumped awake. He had walked some distance in his sleep, it seemed. Tarazion was looking deep into his eyes. He yawned. Tarazion shook him.

‘Arime, awake!’ shouted his companion. He shook him again.

‘Leave me alone!’ cried Arime, struggling against the one-eyed man’s fierce grip. ‘Leave me alone! Let me go!’

With a burst of strength, Arime tore himself out of Tarazion’s hands and stood panting in the tunnel.

‘I know what you want!’ Arime cried in a strange voice. ‘You want my soul! I’m to be sacrificed to the Dragons! I know now why you brought us here —we are to die!’

Tarazion stood still in the passage before him, gathering his breath. He raised his right hand, and pointed away to his left at something beyond them both. Arime stepped back and turned to run. Tarazion spoke:

‘Arime! Look!’

Arime stopped in his tracks and looked. The tunnel had either vanished or they had emerged from it some time ago

without noticing. They were near one wall of a vast cavern, much larger than any he had yet seen. The green glow lingered on nearby rocks, but soon faded as they spread out on all sides around him. But the cavern ahead of him was not lit by the light of the green stones —it was suddenly filled with a glorious golden light that blinded him. His eyes brimmed over with light, white-seeming at first, but cooling then to faded gold.

‘What...what is it?’ stammered Arime, shocked back into sanity, and stumbling up from where he had fallen into thick sand. Lonia was clambering to her feet, too, dizzy and still partly blinded as he was.

‘We are here,’ said Tarazion, gathering them both to him and embracing them. ‘The Hall of the Sword,’ he added. It was an embrace of joy he held them in, of triumph, Arime felt. His own arms were stiff with tension and weariness. The one-eyed man looked in each of their faces.

‘Have you felt it?’ he said quietly to Arime. Arime, still seeing shadows of gold before his eyes, returned his gaze.

‘What? Felt what?’ he said.

‘Here, in the deeps of the Underworld, we walk on the very brink of Raendu’s Dream: here, down in the cold, lightless stone, it can seem that everything that we thought and believed and wondered at in the world above was just a shimmering phantom. But look...’

He led them a little way forward. They looked up at a vast, bright cleft in the stone, higher than a mountain. Through the cleft poured a golden light, or so it seemed to their darkened eyes — it was not like sunlight, but flickering and alive, like firelight. It emanated from the walls beyond

the cleft.

As they walked further through the immense valley that now opened up ahead of them, they saw more and more: an immense golden world, glowing and moving. Out beyond the end of the valley, the walls fell away and they looked out upon a cavern so vast that it felt like no cavern at all — it was an inner world, a sparkling, shimmering, glittering world in which the roof or under-sky shone a golden white and in which they could make out low hills and valleys, and something bright and gold-coloured like flaxen straws, weaving between and through them.

On the brink of the valley, where the ground beneath their feet sloped away into this misty golden domain, they paused to rest upon a large stone. They were struck silent for some time.

‘What is the light?’ Lonia asked after a while.

‘By an enchantment, or by the design of the Dragons who made these halls,’ Tarazion answered, ‘this strange and wondrous light shines out through limitless stone, flickering like fire, buried but infinitely beautiful, beaming through crystal. Come!’

He led them a short way to the stones curving down on his right, the lower parts of the vast cavern walls which arched up to invisible heights over them. As they drew near, they could see that the walls were indeed made of crystal — silver, perhaps, or purest white — but deep within their crystalline hearts burned golden flames, like immense candles, giving forth golden light and a gentle heat. Tarazion reached out and touched the surface.

‘It is warm to the touch,’ he said, smiling at their awed

faces. 'The light and heat of the dragon's world in which we now walk. And see!'

He took a few steps to his left and there, bubbling from a crack in the crystal, a small stream of silver water issued.

'This is the dragonwater of which the Warden spoke,' he said, pulling from his pack the water bottles which had been growing worryingly lighter as they went. 'This is the potent wine of the dragons. One sip, and we are no longer mere mortals!' He laughed as he said it, but his eyes glinted with an eager fire. He dipped each bottle into the stream. 'Taste it!'

Warily, both Arime and Lonia sipped at the bottles which Tarazion had filled. The water tasted warm, smooth, light. They swallowed and felt a warmth and a smoothness and a lightness envelop them, not like the burning sensation of a mortal liquor but like an embrace. Arime became aware of how cold his flesh had been — long days under the earth had chilled him to the centre of his bones, but slowly, so that he had almost not noticed. Now, one sip of this twinkling water flooded his body with a gentle candle flame of warmth. He felt it wash over him, from his mouth to his stomach and outward, along his arms and legs to the tips of his fingers and toes. His eyes felt clearer; his heart beat strongly. It was as though he was resting after having run for a mile. He looked at Lonia. She had sat down on the rock, holding her head, breathing heavily — but when she looked up at him, her eyes shone.

'Wh-what is this...?' Arime said finally, as he watched Tarazion chuckling to himself.

'The water of the dragons,' he explained. 'It bubbles up from somewhere deeper in the earth than any mortal stream.'

No one knows what it contains, but Valkurn wrote of it and of its power. Drink it with care! It was not brewed for our blood. But it will serve us well on our continuing journey. When I was last in this place, it gave me strength and endurance beyond words — it can serve instead of food, for quite some time.’ He lifted his own bottle to his mouth and took one deep draught. ‘One mouthful will last you a day or more. And we should journey deeper into the Hall before we sleep, if sleep we can in this strange place.’

They corked their bottles, still staggered by the effects of the water, and carried on. As they made their way further down into the golden country, following what seemed a natural way among the stones, Arime felt his body grow lighter and his breathing calmer; his arms and legs felt stronger. He sensed that he could run rather than walk, despite the wearisome journey so far. He and Lonja laughed at each other, and with Tarazion, as the water’s power continued to burn in them.

‘Mayhap, if we were to drink enough, we could fly,’ he said, as they left behind the dark stone tunnels and reached the bottom of a bright valley.

This new country was marvellous and perplexing. In the bottom of a shallow valley, they saw that they were surrounded by low, undulating hills, between which ran a curving road, carved out by water, perhaps, or perhaps designed by some unimaginable mind. The road led them along the surface of the immense cavity. Ahead they could see no horizon, only a shimmering white-gold glow; above them, the roof of the cavern was out of sight and the sky was

a shifting whiteness, flecked with gold. The air was warm, but a gentle breeze rippled through it laden with scents they could not name: sharp, sweet, fleeting.

‘Had gold a scent,’ said Arime after a while, ‘then this air would reek of it.’

‘A pleasant scent, though, do you not think?’ replied Lonja, breathing deeply. ‘I find it getting into me much like the water. It’s as though we walk in a dream.’

‘Not Raendu’s Dream, though,’ said Tarazion, from some way ahead. ‘This is the Dragonrealm, strange to mortal eyes and hearts. It might grow hard to keep our wits about us as we go further into it.’

‘How far do we go?’ asked Arime. The landscape had not changed for a few miles now — just low hills and a flat road curving between them, as far as they could see.

‘When I last walked this road, many years ago, I was here for other purposes. It is useless to speak of days here. But I think we will sleep twice more before we reach our destination.’

‘And where exactly is our destination?’ Arime asked. ‘I mean, I know we seek the Sword — but what exactly are we looking for?’

‘A silver tower of stone, tall and steep,’ Tarazion said. ‘At the top, so Valkurn wrote, lies the Place of the Sword. But I do not know what perils, other than water or air, may lie between us and it.’

They went on. Soon Arime noticed that the hills were frosted with a feathery white growth, like pale heather. In places, this grew together in large mats of fine fibrous material.

‘Does life thrive, even here?’ he said, stopping to examine a frond of the flat, brush-like plant.

‘Some kind of life, yes,’ said Tarazion. ‘Here is light, of a sort, and water. But as you may have surmised, the light here, though bright to our eyes, is but a fraction of the sun’s light on the surface far above. I think it no more than a candle’s strength.’

Arime looked around and above, and agreed: though the sky seemed white, it was a soft and faint whiteness compared to the light of day outside. As he watched the shimmering air move above them, a faint shower of the lightest of rains began, sweeping over the white hills, and they huddled in their cloaks and walked on.

In the distance, though all around them had ever been silent, they heard a low, continuous roll of thunder, almost beyond the edge of hearing.

Though they had trouble sleeping in this strange, pale, almost silent land, they managed to pass through two periods of rest as they continued to follow the path. Tarazion explained to them that the path was their only guide, and that to leave it meant risking being lost forever amid the featureless white mounds, each one much the same as the other. As to how or why the path came to be, he could not say.

‘I do not think of it as a dragon’s road,’ he said as they awoke after their second sleep, ‘for dragons are creatures of the air and do not spend long upon the earth. But this road is spoken of in the legends of Valkurn, and points the way we go — so we must have faith in it, as he did.’

Soon after they had woken and walked on, they came upon an even stranger and more wonderful sight: looming out of the whiteness ahead came a tower of pale rock, its heart glowing with golden fire like the walls which were distant from them. But cascading down the tower was an immense waterfall, beginning high in the clouds and thundering down into a large lake. Steam rose from the surface of the water. The noise of the waterfall had been the distant peal of thunder they had heard far back on the path.

The water was warm and light and they bathed in it. Their skins sang afterward, cleansed of weeks of grime from their long journeying. Once they had rested and dressed again, Tarazion pointed up at the tower.

‘Do not quail when I say this,’ he said, looking at them, ‘but our destination lies at the top of this tower.’

Arime and Lonia looked up. Faint, shimmering clouds hid the tower’s summit, but its sides looked insurmountable.

‘It is not as grim as it seems,’ Tarazion went on. ‘And here, history and legend fail to present us with any clues — but deep in the side of the stone, someone in ages past has made a stair. And upon that stair, mortal feet can walk.’

He followed the white road some distance further and then led them to the tower’s foot, a little way from the edge of the lake. The great fall plummeted to its end nearby, and he had to raise his voice to speak again.

‘There,’ he said, pointing.

They could see, jaggedly carved into the tower’s wall, a narrow stair — each step was high, so that they would be half-climbing as much as walking, but it was wide enough for them not to feel as though they would topple from its

edge as they climbed.

Filling their bottles and drinking a deep mouthful of the dragonwater, they commenced their climb.

It was a long and wearisome way. But new strength flowed through them — a combination of being in a world once again able to be seen with mortal eyes, as opposed to the blank and black darkness of the earlier tunnels and caverns, and the surging power of the dragonwater. Before too long, Arime was able to look down from high above the lake and see its circumference stretching out for miles below, spilling as it did between the low white hills, turning some of them into little islands. The faint white-gold light fell like an evening twilight across the whole giant world, filled with the roar of the waterfall nearby. From this vantage point, he glimpsed many other wonders: far away, fiery red waterfalls cascaded down what must have been the distant walls of the vast space; on the edge of sight, three needle-like pillars glinted white and blue in the golden light, taller, it seemed, than the tower on the side of which he now stood; in the middle distance, clustered golden and red shapes that may have been a forest or some kind of city, he could not tell. His mind whirled and he grew dizzy with questions — but, aware that he needed to stay steady, he gripped the stone stair and continued to climb.

Tarazion had told them that they needed to reach the peak of the towering stone before another long rest — none of them wanted to drift into sleep perched so high on the stairs, though they seemed wide enough — and at first that had seemed daunting, but with increased endurance they climbed and climbed for many hours until they reached the

summit.

The stair suddenly flattened out, and they found that they were standing on the wide shores of another, smaller lake, high amid faint white clouds of vapour atop the tower of stone. They were drenched in a fine, cool mist, and to their right, the lip of this lake poured over the brink of the tower to become the mighty falls whose sound still drowned out everything else — but, looking up, they saw an even greater wonder.

Far, far above them, lost in whiteness, came pouring another fall of water, but this time, it seemed, from the sky itself. As their eyes took in the scene, they could see that from the heart of the clouds came a wide and strong blue stream, falling and falling through cloudy air until it tumbled with its own musical thunder into this high pool.

‘Thus we are reminded,’ said Tarazion, over the music of the waters, ‘that our sky here is stone. This is water from the world above, finding itself a new home in the world below.’

They stood there for some time, as though caught in a spell, drinking in the sounds and the fresh scents of the falling water, and watching it tumble into the pool. Then, abruptly, as they watched, there came a brighter light momentarily, flashing from the same source as the endlessly falling stream far, far above. Pure liquid gold, it seemed, and too bright for them to look at — a beam of coruscating brilliance unlike anything they had seen since they had closed the Green Door behind them, long ago.

‘What is that?’ cried Arime, shielding his eyes.

‘Daylight,’ Tarazion said, shouting above the sound of the waters around them. ‘Light from the sky above falling deep

into the heart of this place through some deep cleft in the earth, once each mortal day. It is a short light, for the sun, Raendu's Star, moves swiftly across the faraway sky—and it seems so bright that it blinds the unwary.'

'What is this place?' asked Arime. He felt shaken and unnerved by wonders.

'The Place of the Sword,' replied Tarazion.

As quickly as it had appeared, the bright light vanished, leaving them enfolded again in the more gentle white-gold glow of the Underworld.

They rested by the edge of the high pool, and Arime fell almost immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep, surrounded by wonders. When he awoke—how many hours later?—he felt as rested as he had felt since they had entered the first tunnel.

'Are you awake, prince? Somewhere just ahead of us lies the Sword,' said Tarazion.

Arime said nothing.

'I am afraid, Arime,' said the one-eyed man after a while. Arime felt his heart waiting to beat. 'I am afraid of what comes next. Afraid of the road ahead,' Tarazion went on. 'So far I knew the way. The road to the Sword is not that hard to find or follow, as you have seen—though strange beyond language, it can be walked. But what then, Arime? What of the road ahead? I fear the great darkness that lies ahead, a darkness of the underworld and of my own mind. I do not know if I will see the end of this road. Something lies across my way.'

Arime turned to him. He still could not speak.

'You said to me that the Sword lies on the road, but not at

its end,' he said at last. 'Where then does this road lead?'

'The Underworld is vast,' replied Tarazion. 'After the world was made, the Dragons stirred in the depths, making their own kingdoms. Aradu drew the Dragons into the upper world —and so came doom, and the upper world fell. But who knows how vast is this realm of the Dragons? Few mortals have spoken with them, and they do not speak of it to any living creature.'

'What I believe is this: that these caverns go on, even deeper beneath the earth, to yet unseen wonders and things too great and deep for the mortal eye to glimpse or the mind to comprehend. And the caverns come beneath Wormstone in the Dark Isles, and there is the thing I cannot see, the thing I fear, the core of Dare-kor's power. But I think that is the road we must take.'

'Why are you afraid then?' asked Arime.

Tarazion thought for a while.

'Because I do not know if that way leads to life or death.'

'You know not whether you will live or die on any path. All roads lead to the unknown, it seems,' Arime said.

Tarazion paused.

'That is true. There are no guarantees, no securities. No certainty but what we choose for ourselves. Thus is there freedom.' He was silent for a while. 'Perhaps you will make a king yet,' he added.

They sat there by the bright waters for some time, listening to the steady music of the falling stream.

'Are we to sit here forever?' said Lonina suddenly. 'Or did we come here to fetch a sword?'

'You are awake?' said Arime in surprise.

'I have not slept. I have been wondering at the fate which brings me here. I did not expect to meet my death so far from home, in so strange a place.'

'Do you think we go to our death, then?' asked Arime quietly.

'It seems as likely to me as anything else, surrounded as we are by this strange world. Have you not felt it? As we walked, it smothered me until I almost cried out. I feel we are now too deeply buried under it to ever see the light of day again.'

'Say not that the dragon's world is evil, Lonia,' said Tarazion gently. 'And despair not of ever seeing the face of your prince by the light of day again. The domain of the dragons is strange, and can sweep the mind of a man or woman clean with ease, but it is not evil. It is Other. It is not part of Raendu's Dream, as the sun and the moon are. Only ancient sins made it evil by bringing it into the light of Raendu's Star. But even that can be turned to glory. Soon, by my reckoning, there will be another glimpse of sunlight from our world. We should be by the Sword by then. Let us go! Then you may see each other by daylight at least once more!'

They stood and hoisted their packs onto their shoulders, and went on.

The floor of the top of the tower was of white sand, littered with pebbles and pierced with huge outcroppings of stone, some narrowing to points as sharp as needles. Around and between these they went, always walking ahead, keeping the rocks to their left and the blue, lapping pool to their right, always following Tarazion. Nothing could be seen at first, as the cool, pale clouds closed in around them like

fog. But then Arime thought he could glimpse something: a dull flicker of light in the mist, that was gone as soon as seen. He stared, straining into the fog as they walked. The floor began to slope gradually up. It was as though they were climbing a hill, and Arime became very aware that they were atop a soaring tower of stone and might suddenly come upon its edge and plummet to their deaths. A cold movement of air swept across them and they huddled into their cloaks. There was the flicker again, stronger this time. It was ahead, at the top of the slope. They climbed. The light grew. Arime now found that, instead of being the last in the file as he had been for as long as he could remember, they were all climbing side by side, and quite rapidly. He found that he was almost running—he could see the others, and they were running too, a strange look of something like joy on their faces. He looked ahead.

They had come to the end of the slope. Dim white light lay around them—it was very faint, hardly a light at all, but now like full moonlight or a grey dawn to them. In the middle of the slope was a slightly brighter column of light, a beam descending from the roof. Something gleamed at the bottom of the column of luminescence. They had slowed to a walk now and approached it.

Arime thought of his dream, the dream of the Sword that he had had in distant Tara. This was that hill, and there were no stars, only stone. He saw what it was that waited for him.

It was the Sword, standing upright in a great white stone. It was faintly golden in colour.

All around it was silence and emptiness, except for the thunder of falling water, now behind them.

‘Behold, Sundergost,’ said Tarazion in a quiet voice which nevertheless shook the air, ‘waiting in the timeless Hall of the Dragons—but the Dragons are no longer here.’

Arime stepped forward. Sundergost was a beautiful thing: long, slender, golden, intricately entwined with designs so fine that they were almost invisible, especially in that light. This was the Sword that his ancestor Valkurn had wielded; the Sword that had slain the Black Dragon long before even that. This was Sundergost, the salvation of the world. It stood naked, without scabbard, sheathed only with its tip in raw stone. It glowed with power as though it was red-hot. Here, in the midst of alien strangeness, in the heart of the Dragonrealm, was a thing made for mortal hands.

Arime looked at Tarazion, but the one-eyed man did not return his glance—indeed, he did not look like Tarazion to Arime’s eyes at that moment: he was tall, and strong, and his beard was golden and fiery red. He looked as though he had in fact been born of stone in the depths of a mountain and had swum molten rivers, and had ridden Unicorns. Then he looked at Arime at last, feeling the eyes upon him.

‘Thou art afraid that it will burn,’ he said, in the old speech. ‘So was he. But as the Herald Estran said to Valkurn, the father of thy fathers, “If thou wert offered a sword which was the salvation of things and the deliverance of the world, wouldst thou pluck it from the fire even though it might burn thy hand?”’

Arime turned back to the Sword. He saw then that he had not expected to find anything here but empty stone, and he wondered at his lack of faith. The voices of the shadows that had driven him insane on his way through the Underworld

now receded: here was the Sword Sundergost, right in the heart of their meaningless world, banishing them — a blade made for his hand, it seemed, in a world that was not made for mortals at all. He stepped nearer.

‘We take the fate of our own lives and those of many others into our hands with this deed,’ he said to Lonia, gripping her hand. She nodded. He released her hand and stepped into the light.

‘Beware the power of Sundergost,’ said Tarazion from behind him, ‘for in bringing forth the Sword into the world again much may be changed, and swiftly. It will come like a great wind into the affairs of mortals.’

Arime paused, looking at the blade before him.

It was as though he had stepped out onto a stage before thousands of people. In his mind the cavern and all of Underworld disappeared. He looked up. The light of the sun far above at that moment spilled down through endless miles of solid rock and washed over the Sword as he stood by it. He took it and drew it forth from the stone. It came out easily, and shone bright golden in the sudden sunlight, but it neither burned nor blinded him. He lifted it up. He had thought it would be too heavy, but it was as light as a wand of willow in his hands. All his fears, his questions, his uncertainties, his youthful anxiety, fled from his soul in that instant and he shone in the light with no shadow.

Then it was gone, and all fell pale and grey again. He breathed again. He was Arime again. He blinked the golden light-shadows from his eyes. The Sword was heavy in his hands.

‘They say that the heirs of Valkurn alone can wield that

Sword,' Tarazion was saying, 'but it is not so. Any who can see the Vision Unbroken can wield Sundergost without being burned by its dragonfire, for it is the union of the Dream of Raendu. And yet thou art Valkurn's child, come at last through peril to the threshold of wonder.'

Arime staggered down from the peak of the slope into Lonia's arms, and closed his eyes, knowing that he held Sundergost at last.

THE ROAD BACK

Swords bring many things, but not wisdom.

-Rondarian proverb

At that moment, Lonia felt as though she would pass out—and indeed, it seemed to her that perhaps she had lost consciousness for a short while, for she was suddenly aware that Tarazion and Arime were speaking to one another in the High Tongue a few feet from her.

‘I am resolved in this,’ Arime was saying. He spoke with a new voice, stronger but more distant, she thought.

‘Then nothing that I can say or do will dissuade thee from thy course? Despite all that I have guided thee through?’ Tarazion replied.

‘Tarazion,’ Arime said, ‘thou must see that things have now changed. Now that I hold Sundergost in my hands the world appears different to me. I know not if it is because of some spell in the Sword—thou knowest more of these things than I— but the mists and fogs which have beset me all my life have withdrawn: I can see what I must do.’

‘And that is to go back?’

‘Yes! To go back and use this blade, as thou hast said, to strike the best blow, to bring the promised change! Always I have been without the power to protect those I have loved from the Darkness—now they need fear no longer. For Sundergost is mine, and with it I intend to rescue them all.’

‘Syra?’

‘And any others that I love. Even the memory of my

mother, perhaps. It is time to cease running from these things, Tarazion, hiding beneath the earth —thou must see the wisdom in that! I have been a piece on the chessboard too long. The Darkness has had its own way for too long. It is time for action!’

Tarazion was silent for a while. Lonia could not tell if he moved or sighed in the grey fogginess which had surrounded them. She felt a great weariness and anxiety in him.

‘Thou no longer feel like a chess piece, then?’ he said after a while.

‘Nay, Tarazion —I feel like a King. Thou must have known this would come to pass sooner or later. Did thou not say that the Sword would come like a wind, changing all? Canst thou not see what it is that I am saying? I would have thy agreement in this. Thou sayest that the best course is to go on —but on to what? More caves, more tunnels, perhaps even dead ends and death. While Baladac is crowned, and the Usurper planted in my sister’s womb? I’ll have none of it!’

Arime was shouting now, walking around in the space before the edge of the blue lake, and swinging the Sword in his hands as he spoke. Lonia could make out glimmerings of light from it —the golden, phantom arc of the shimmering blade. She did not like what Arime was saying —no, not what he was saying, for if truth were told she would have given much to be free of these caves: it was the voice in which he was saying it. Something had happened to him, something had changed when he had plucked the Sword from the rock, something she did not like.

‘Where then would thou let fall this blow?’ said Tarazion

quietly —and, Lonia thought, with a great weariness.

Arime stopped and turned to him. He stopped to think.

‘I must return to Tara,’ he said. ‘I must confront and fight Baladac. The High Throne must be won, before it is usurped. Then we shall see about the Dark Isles and the festering evil there.’

‘And to come near Baladac?’

Arime thought for a long moment.

‘We can enter Tara from the south, through the Great Marshes,’ he said after a while. ‘Then we can blend with the many hosts that must be encamped beneath the High Houses. It will be a simple matter then to enter the secret passages and find the Turgalin where he sits or sleeps —and slay him.’

‘Thou speakest each time after a pause,’ said Tarazion, ‘as though thou wait for counsel from some inner voice. Who is it that has greater power in thy counsels than I? To whom dost thou pay greater heed?’

Arime turned on him then —Lonia both felt and saw it in the dim white shadows.

‘To myself!’ he snapped. ‘To myself! At last! I am tired of the counsel of others. Always the wise course, always the decision coming down through the ages to be laid before me, always the foretold path, the chosen way, the pre-ordained road! So thou stood behind every decision I made in Tara — so was I plucked from my home by thy command. Even my dreams, it seems, are not my own. Well, so be it! If I am to be High King, then I shall be so —and let none say me nay. But Sundergost gives me the strength to decide my own road.’

He was breathing hard and standing right in front of

Tarazion now. Lonia expected the old man to move, to raise himself as he had done in the kitchen at Wenfold Well so far away. But he did not—he simply stood there, his head bowed, unmoving, looking very tired.

‘Swords bring many things then,’ he said quietly, ‘but not wisdom, as they say in Rondar.’ Then in a louder voice he said: ‘Dost thou then release me from my oath, sire?’

‘Thine oath?’ said Arime, stepping back.

‘To thy mother. To watch over thee.’

Arime paused.

‘Was there not more to it than an oath to her?’ he said after a moment. ‘In the Book of Seven she said that thou had said to her..’

‘The Book! The Book of Seven is only a book, Arime! Full of words, not of life!’ snapped Tarazion, interrupting him. ‘Thou cravest freedom to act? Yet when I make to withdraw so that thou mayst have that freedom, thou turnst to the Book, and look there for comfort! I ask thee—dost thou release me from my promise to thy mother? I may be bound by other oaths, but of their fulfilment or failure I am not bound to speak to thee. Answer!’

Arime was frozen, his breathing unsteady. Lonia got to her feet and was about to speak when she heard something—a distant rumbling, like a thunder which would not stop, above and beyond the thunder of the falls.

‘Listen!’ she said and they both turned in the darkness. The sound was growing quickly louder. The cold wind which she had felt since she awoke was now whistling violently about her. Tarazion cried out.

‘How long have we stood here? We are in deadly peril!’

‘Why?’ she shouted —the wind was so loud now that she had to shout to hear her own voice.

‘Quickly!’ said Tarazion, not answering her. He led them both to the foot of the great white stone in which Sundergost had been set. There, in the dimmest of dim lights, she saw a tiny rivulet of silver water, bubbling out from a dark crack in the stone and trickling away into the lake.

‘Fill your water bottles!’ ordered Tarazion, moving quickly to fill his own. ‘I planned to lead us on into the Underworld, to the deeper realms and to our destiny —but we are too late now!’

‘Why?’ yelled Arime. ‘Are the Dragons themselves coming?’

He had voiced her dread, Lonia thought. The thunder had changed now —it was a great roaring like a thousand fires, and the wind sucked their cloaks upwards as it swept through the chasm whence the sun had shone not long before. She looked up, but could see nothing but a dim light and the ever-falling stream, and the white clouds —no hope of escape that way, so far above them.

‘Not the Dragons, but their work,’ replied Tarazion, as they stood and withdrew from the stone. ‘The drawing of the Sword has released great forces in the world around us. We should have fled this place at once! Now we must run and speak later if there is a chance!’

So saying he began to run along the shores of the lake and down the great stone stairs up which they had climbed, and they followed him.

Down they ran, hugging as closely to the tall walls of the tower as they could, daring not to look over the brink. Lonia,

to her astonishment, noticed that the light was growing, and that she had been able to see her companions more clearly as they leapt down the stair. It was not the light of the sun descending the chasm, nor was it the faint glow of the crystal rocks: it was an altogether more terrible sight, a fiery red luminescence which shone and flickered from below them and came with a breath —she felt it sweep over them now— of deadly heat. It lit all the cavern around them, and guided their eyes. She turned back as they ran. She caught nothing more than a glimpse but it made her cry out. The top of the tower above them was gone. It had collapsed, it seemed, and was toppling over, crashing down with the mighty falls. She could make out nothing else clearly. Then the noise rumbled over them, now louder than before, consuming all thought and sound with its trapped echoes. She stumbled, running on. Tarazion and Arime were beside her. They were struggling now, as great cracks appeared in each stair even as they placed their feet upon them. They wavered and scabbled at the face of the rock on one side.

Then Lonía felt herself knocked over from behind. She screamed, but it was not a beast or anything living which had struck her —it was a wall of water, which swatted her like a giant's hand and pressed her flat against the stair. Arime and Tarazion were struggling near her. She staggered up. The water had receded for a moment. In a few more moments, she had clambered onto a lower stair with the others. Breathless, she turned and looked back.

They were standing near the foot of the tower up which they had climbed. All the world —or what had been the world for them for a while— was in turmoil. Distant crystal

walls were tumbling far away; parts of the invisible roof were crashing down onto the cavern's floor with thundering booms which reached them minutes after the terrible sight had met their eyes. A vast grey and black sea had emerged from some deeper blackness and was swamping the white hills. Above it, huge tongues of fire lit the dust and steam-swept stone. The water and fire were tumbling nearer as they watched. The earth shook as though it would split. Lonia felt her whole body vibrating as she turned to run. Her ears hurt with the sound. Tarazion was shouting something but she could not hear him.

They ran, heading back the way they had come, but upon a road which cracked and shook as they set foot upon it. Water swirled around their ankles, heralding a mightier flood coming their way over the low hilltops. Lonia saw strange thick mats of intertwining fibres sweep past them, afloat on the surface.

'Quickly!' she cried. 'Climb onto one of these!'

The others paused, uncomprehending, then suddenly saw what she meant. They stepped onto one of the giant fibre mats — just in time. A huge wave smashed into them, and then thundered over them, and when they emerged they saw that they were floating on its crest, surging ahead, borne by the immense tide which was flooding the Underworld.

The fibre mat, which had become a raft, bore them with numbing speed towards the rocky walls around the cavern. They turned and watched a sight almost too large for their minds to take in: the cavern, as large as a world, was collapsing. Massive sections of stone roof appeared above in the churning white clouds, like huge ships emerging from

fog at frightening speed, and then, silently at first, they plunged into what had become a sea all around them. A moment later, the deafening sound struck them, followed by vast waves. They clung to the fibres of their raft as it was hurtled onward.

At one point, Lonia thought she would drown — the raft was submerged by a wave so huge that it didn't pass by for many minutes. But then there was a crunch that was audible even over the overwhelming crashing all around her, and the raft jarred. She looked up from the closely knit fibres at which she had been staring in terror, and saw that they had been washed up inside the giant cleft of stone through which they had come long before. In the Underworld, grey and red light was dimming and the thunderous nightmare of water continued, but in the valley there was a different sound: a giant grinding of stone.

Arime grabbed her arm and she was pulled along, onto a stone shelf which trembled beneath her feet. Dust and rock fell about them as they ran. The noise, though, grew somewhat less there.

'What's happening?' cried Arime.

'The Hall of the Sword is no more,' replied Tarazion, staggering against a wall. 'The Dragons must have desired it so. Without the Sword, and without them, it will be as dark as the rest of the under-earth. But we are far from safe here! Run!'

As he spoke a mighty weight of stone crashed down around them. Lonia leapt as great boulders rolled under her feet, and she coughed as the valley filled with dust. Even the faint light had gone, and she could hardly see ahead. In a

terror she thought that she had been left behind and burst onwards.

Within moments she emerged into a hall of fire. She was sure it had not been there before. The others were there — Tarazion standing tall, Arime bowed and breathless, Sundergost still in his hand. The Sword shone with the red-golden light that lay all around them.

The floor of this new cave was molten rock, burning, spitting, moving a few yards from their feet. The heat of it struck them like a blow. A great sea of fire was pouring in from the left — the roof was lost in steam and dust. Darkness curled away to their right.

‘What are we to do?’ said Arime, looking up at him. ‘There is no way out of here!’ The deadly thunder of that fiery torrent almost drowned his words.

Tarazion turned suddenly to Arime with a look more intense than fire in his eyes.

‘Arime,’ he said in a great and steady voice in the High Tongue, ‘dost thou now release me from my promise as I have asked?’

Arime stood blankly, breathing hard.

‘Dost thou?’ shouted the one-eyed man.

‘If that is thy wish, then, yes, I release thee,’ Arime said.

‘Good! Then take heed: thou holdest Sundergost in thy hand. It was my intention that we take the Sword to the Darkness at the end of this road, but this can no longer be, unless some greater thing is done to keep open the way.’ He spoke quickly, looking around him breathlessly. ‘Perhaps I can keep that way open. But thou must now return to the world of light, for that is in all likelihood the only way out of

here now —but beware! As thou hast seen, the release of Sundergost can change the world, as I warned thee. Perhaps it has deeds to do in the daylight before it returns to the dark. I cannot say: I fear that thou and I will walk a darker path because of this, but time will tell. Thou art on a road of thine own choosing now. But thou must go! Now! Go along the ledge to the right!’

They clambered in the direction he indicated. Ahead was a narrow gateway in the rock, but even as they looked at it, the walls moved, shuffling with an aching grind closer and closer together. Tarazion leapt ahead of them and braced himself against the walls. With a mighty effort, he held the movement for a brief instant.

‘Go through, both of you!’ he commanded, and they squeezed past him and over him to where the space opened out again.

‘Arime,’ Tarazion said, straining to speak, ‘Raendu go with thee!’

Lonia saw Arime choke back tears, but she had no chance to speak. Tarazion disappeared in a cloud of thundering dust as the walls shifted again. Then she heard him cry out from within the cloud.

‘Watch over him, Lonia! Be a star in his darkness! I may yet see thee again, or another Herald will come! Remember me! Look for my face in the waters of Kaela!’ he cried. ‘Farewell!’

There was a great thunderclap, and the rocks closed.

They hurried on, not daring to look back, stepping only a few feet from death as the golden, shimmering, steaming and smoking floor swam nearer. Climbing a little above the

chaos, Lonia looked quickly down the way they had come. Deep in the cave, surrounded by glowing fires and fiery steams she thought she saw Tarazion again, briefly, a figure lost in the dust. Then a cloud arose and he was gone.

They had no time for words. The ledge they had followed now climbed steeply above the fire, but it had already crumbled behind them. There was no going back. Huge noises of collapsing stone surrounded them, but even over this Lonia heard Arime cursing and weeping. They blundered on. Suddenly, as swiftly as though someone had closed a door on a furnace, they turned a corner and the heat and light vanished. They were in a tunnel, leading steeply upwards. Steam billowed along its ceiling but it was far quieter and cooler. They kept going for what seemed to Lonia to be many miles. Then they collapsed, both together, both unspeaking, in a dark corner.

There was no way for Lonia to know, when she awoke, how long had passed in the darkness, but the terrible noises grew louder as she sat in that night without end, and after a long while she judged that she must wake Arime and move on. The earth shook around them from time to time, and great echoes of grinding stone came to them from the depths they had left. Lonia turned to where Arime lay, but found him awake already—he was staring, as far as she could tell, into the darkness.

‘Lost,’ he whispered to her as she touched him, ‘lost like the rest. Even with the Sword I could not save him.’

He raised Sundergost, and even in that lightless tunnel Lonia thought she saw a faint glimmer of gold along its

slender blade.

‘Come,’ she said quietly, ‘we must go on.’

He followed her without speaking and they trudged on, always upwards. The tunnel they were in seemed very straight, almost unnaturally so. Its walls were rough, but smoother than many of the walls of other caverns and tunnels they had passed through, but there was no light, and no trace of the green rocks which had given the road they had walked its name. They went on in darkness, stopping occasionally to eat a morsel of what food remained to them, and to sip the water.

The dragonwater in their bottles tasted no different to ordinary water, but filled them with a burning strength like a rich wine. Soon they were travelling on the water alone, and ate only for the sake of feeling something more solid in their mouths. Physically, new health and energy came to them as they went—but the darkness went on, the darkness that was now full of unspeakable loss and terror, and their hearts grew no lighter. As they went, Lonía found Arime easily led, like a tired beast: he did not speak, or resist, but followed behind as though on a leash, dragging his feet. The only thing that seemed able to stir him to life was when she tried to take the Sword from his hands to rest them: then he pulled away and fought her, clutching the Sword to himself as though it were a living thing and he its protector. She gave up trying to get him to set it aside, and he slept with it under him, and ate with one hand, never letting it go.

Lonía did not know where she was heading, only that the road she was on wandered endlessly upwards through unchanging rock. Then change came. Icy light grew ahead of

them —light so much stronger and different from the strange lights they had seen below that suddenly memories they had thought gone forever of sunlight and clouds and the wind came rushing back to them and they found themselves running up the slope.

But when they reached the light it was not the light of day. It was a cold, dim light, and they were in a tall and narrow cavern with very pale, blue walls, shimmering like ice. Lonia touched the crystal stone near her —it was not ice, but light from somewhere far above shone through it as though it were. It was cold in the cavern. They had left the rivers of heat far behind them, and, as far as Lonia could calculate, they had walked for many days. They shivered.

It was also not completely silent. Half-heard whisperings of moving air wandered through that shining palace, as though invisible courtiers moved along its mysterious corridors. Sharp spires stood up from the uneven floor in thousands, and mighty chandeliers of glittering crystal met them, hanging down, impossibly heavy, from the far-away roof. It was, Lonia felt, almost a holy place, and no matter how hard she tried not to think of it, she could not dismiss the feeling that it was in fact occupied, but not by any mortal presence or anything that might be detected by mortal senses. It was vast, and wound away from them for miles.

They had no choice but to go on, making their way across the floor like ants in a giant's palace. They could not rest there, and walked on until they reached what seemed to be the entrance to a cleft in darker rock, into which Lonia led them. Here they rested and ate —the food was now very low, and the water almost gone. Lonia wondered if it would last

until they could find a way out of this terrible and wonderful place, but she had no way of knowing.

They went on for what seemed like many days more, and the caverns they passed through, some completely dark, others glittering with gems, still others echoing with mighty winds which howled like buried ghosts, she could not count. Once she thought she saw a white cave of crystal, shining like snow in the sunlight, and at the heart of the cave was a carved throne made also of crystal, but larger than any mortal man could sit upon. Then it was gone, and she wondered if she had dreamed it.

There soon came a day when the last morsel of food had gone and the dragon-water too, and still they went on. They struggled up a narrow tunnel, now moving on hands and knees in their weakness. The tunnel seemed somehow familiar, but Lonia had forgotten all her life again—she felt as though she had been born under the earth and had lived there, and that the vague pictures of the sun and fields which occasionally flashed before her in sleep and while awake were phantom dreams only. She crawled on, until there came a time when her hands met something ahead of her, blocking the way.

It—whatever it was—lay right across the tunnel. 'Here is death, then,' she thought, without feeling, and collapsed onto the stone floor. But Arime, coming behind her and feeling the same barrier across their path, fell heavily against it and it moved.

It opened. Something—several things—lay beyond it that made Lonia think that she had died indeed. Something green, far greener than the glowing rocks, almost blinded her

with its colour; sounds flooded into the passage far richer and more varied than she remembered, lighter than the trickling of underground water, more musical than the muttering of dark winds in stone. The roof seemed whiter than she would have thought possible. This must be either a far greater cavern than any they had yet seen, she thought, or she had died —these were the only possibilities.

Arime groaned near her —he was trying to speak, but she could not understand him. A sweet scent washed over her — and within a moment she was fully awake. The smell had done what neither sight nor sound had managed: she had remembered the other possibility —she was outside the tunnel, in the open. She clambered forward. Soft grass and moss melted in her hands —so soft and rich after the hard stone which had become her whole world. She laughed.

Bright sunlight, brighter at that moment to her eyes than the light of heaven, beamed into the glen in which they sat. Birds sang; trees moved in a light breeze; pale clouds clustered around the mountaintops all around them. She had forgotten something —she could not at first guess what it was, then it came to her: she had forgotten the sky. Space was all around her, almost too much in its abundance: space without stone, air blowing freely without barriers. She felt dizzy with it. After an hour or more just sitting there, she passed out.

She awoke in a room she immediately recognised as part of Wenfold. She lay in a rich bed in a large room, surrounded by soft things. For a long while she did not wish to rise, but she noticed that she was ravenously hungry, and clambered

out of the bed and down a narrow staircase. It did not take her long to find her way to the great kitchen in which they had all sat long ago. There a roaring fire blazed on the hearth and the Warden and Bettan stood conversing. They saw her enter and bowed. Life and warmth overcame her.

'My lady,' said the Warden, 'we meet again, and you are most welcome here once more in my humble home.'

'Arime?' she asked.

'He sleeps a great sleep,' said the old man, coming across the room to her. He pointed at something that was resting on two stools near the fire.

'It has taken a great part of my skill to persuade this from his hands,' he said, 'but he will sleep better without it.'

She looked at the thing. It was Sundergost, but it lay inside a scabbard of deep crimson and blue, woven with many characters in writing she did not understand.

'This was Valkurn's scabbard,' said the Warden. 'I have kept it here for the day when someone would again bring forth the Sword of the Dragons.'

'It is beautiful,' she said, but suddenly tears boiled up inside her and she sank into a chair by the fire.

The Warden came to her.

'I know, child, I know,' he said softly, 'it is a hard road, is it not? Not a road for ordinary mortals to walk, lest they are in great need. And it is perilous, even for the greatest. I warned him of it, but there was not much else to be done. In a way, it was his road, too. You do not need to tell me of it now. But when you feel able, I will listen. For the one-eyed man is gone, is he not?'

Lonia nodded through her tears. She looked up at the old

man's face, and as he looked into the fire she thought he looked older and greyer than ever.

'So he is gone,' he said. 'Raendu help us.'

Lonia ate her fill of food richer and more varied than she could remember, and drank of water and wine until her body blazed with a warmth she had not thought possible. But then she took food with Bettan to Arime's room, and left it for him when she found him sleeping. He was deeply asleep, but a frown marked his brow, and his hand clasped at something no longer there.

'So did I find both of you on the threshold of the Green Door as the sun rose,' explained Bettan in a whisper as they watched him, 'for since you left the Warden has bidden me to watch that Door each sunrise lest you should return. So I ran to fetch him, and we brought you here together.'

'How long is it since we left Wenfold, Bettan?' asked Lonia as they closed the door and went back down to the fire in the kitchen.

'It is now the beginning of the spring,' he said. 'When you left it was the middle of winter. But the Warden knows more about the events of the outside world than do I. Let us ask him what has come to pass in the world of men.'

'Baladac has crowned himself High King of Shand,' the Warden told her as they sat by the fire that evening, 'and the true kings and lords of the realms within Shand now gather in Rondar far to the west. So my messengers tell me. Your grandfather yet lives, as does Raegarth of Valadria—but Irraen of Miria perished at the door of the Shandhall, as did

many of the Lords of the South Vale. This is a dark time for Shand, and for all Gandria —but I fear there is worse to come.'

'You mean... their plan? The marriage of which Arime spoke?' said Lonia.

'Yes,' the old man replied. 'Arime's sister Syra prepares herself to be the bride of the Turgalin Prince, and to bear through him the Usurper himself, Gon-runin, who was called the Serpent-King. Then we shall see the true darkness. But not all is dark. I have some news that may cheer our young prince when he wakes.'

The fire crackled as he fell silent. Lonia felt her memories rising from the earth beneath her to swallow the light again, and realised that time had continued in the world of light even as she had wandered in the timeless domain below — but when she looked at the Warden her fear diminished like a heavy stone falling to the bottom of a pool. She found herself telling the story of their descent into the Underworld and of the finding of the Sword. She went on with difficulty to describe their escape.

The Warden stared into the flames for a long while after she had finished.

'Who can read the mind of a dragon?' he said at last. 'Tarazion did not. That the recovery of their sword would be perilous he doubted not —but that it would then destroy their ancient chambers? Even he did not guess that. I wonder...'

Lonia dared to speak her thought:

'Do you think, Warden, that there might be some chance... that Tarazion might still live?'

‘That is what I wonder too, child,’ the Warden said, turning to her, ‘for he would not lightly throw away his life, a life on which far more depends than most. He must have seen a way. You say he asked to be released from his promise?’

Lonia nodded.

‘He thought it important then —to go on?’ the old man was now musing half to himself, but Lonía hung on every word. The Warden stroked his long white beard, and leaned forward on his stick. Firelight flickered over his white gown. The terror of the world below was passing into the quietness and comfort of Wenfold, absorbed by the deep peace there. It did not seem as impossible as it had done before that Tarazion might have found a way out for himself.

‘Where would he have gone then?’ asked Lonía. ‘For he did not walk the same road as we —unless he was a wraith,’ she added, shivering despite the warmth from the fire.

‘I know not, except that he said to me that he had to walk that road to its end. Did he say no more of this to you?’

Lonia shook her head. ‘I do not recall it,’ she said. It was painful to try and remember his words —his face floated before her eyes.

The Warden touched her shoulder.

‘I am sorry,’ he said gently, ‘forgive me. Old men are accustomed to thinking of death. Thinking of his face brings darkness to my heart, too, though. Not only for the loss of a dear friend, dearer to me than many another in this world now living, but also because of what his departure might mean for the world he leaves behind.’

They sat in silence, watching the fire. Bettan had long

since left them, and no other noise could be heard but the snap and crack of twigs in the hearth. Suddenly, a draught blew from behind them. They turned. Arime was standing there, fully clothed, his face grim and pale.

'Where is Sundergost?' he said.

The Warden stood.

'Here, Arime,' he said, 'by the fire.'

Arime took two swift strides and had grasped the sword in its scabbard from where it lay. He clutched it to his chest.

'I forbid any man to touch it again,' he said, staring at them as though from a great distance.

'So be it,' said the Warden. 'It is your blade to do with as you see fit. But it is also the Sword of Dragons, and you may find it wanders from your hand should its destiny lead it elsewhere. Come and sit with us by the fire.'

Arime looked at them for a long while as the Warden sank back into his seat with a groan. Lonia saw a cold emptiness in Arime's eyes. She longed to reach out to him, but feared he was beyond her reach. After a while he sat down and stared into the fire, his face still grim. The Warden said nothing, and watched the logs in the hearth burn lower without moving.

'How soon can we ride for the Great Marshes?' Arime said suddenly.

'As soon as you wish,' said the Warden. 'But the horses you rode to Wenfold on, I'm afraid, have been adopted by Bettan, and will return here if left to themselves.'

'Is there a pass in the Guardians that leads down to the Marshes' edge?' asked Arime, still grim and unmoving.

'Indeed,' replied the Warden. 'And more than that, I can provide you with a map. You will need help to reach the

other side in time.'

Arime glanced across at the old man.

'I perceive your thought, do I not?' said the Warden. 'You want to reach Tara in time to stop Baladac from wedding your sister?'

'Do you question this course?' said Arime bluntly.

The Warden shook his head, and smiled grimly.

'Who am I to question the heir to the High Throne when he holds Sundergost in his hands? No, you must take the path that seems clearest to you, and pray to Raendu for guidance. I will give you what help I can,' he said.

'Warden,' said Lonia, 'what was the news you said you had? The brighter news?'

'Ah yes,' the Warden said, and he told Arime of the news from Shand and of the crowning of Baladac. 'But all is not so bleak for us as our enemies would wish. I have had messages which he will not have heard.'

Arime still did not shift his gaze from the fire, but Lonia thought that he listened more intently nonetheless.

'News comes to me of the long rebellion in Turgal — rebellion against the evil brought thither from the Dark Isles. And leading that rebellion is a tall man with a scar over one eye: his name is Galatar. The people of Turgal are crying out for justice and honour to be restored in their land. It may be that Baladac shall have gained one throne only to lose another.'

'But if Gon-runin comes,' said Arime, 'all shall be lost.'

'True, true,' said the Warden, sighing, 'and sour wine cannot easily be sweetened it seems. But at the last, in this plan of yours, you may need more than one sword on your

side. Let us hope that Galatar can triumph and bring help to the beleaguered lands before the summer ends, or it will be a winter of great slaughter to follow.'

Arime said nothing still, but Lonía could tell that he was thinking over all that the Warden had told him.

'I would ride in the morning,' he said at last. The Warden nodded.

'So be it,' he said. 'You will need to rest deeply tonight, then,' he went on, 'for you are not properly fit from your ordeals under the earth. Dragonwater and short rations can do strange things to the body; and lack of sunlight can even affect the mind. With your permission, we should now retire, and I will show you the maps on the morrow.'

'Show me now,' said Arime.

The Warden sighed, and bowed, and led them both out to a room not unlike the great Library. Great rolls of parchment were piled on tables. No fire burned in the hearth, and it was bitterly cold there, but Arime seemed not to notice, and listened and watched as the Warden patiently pointed out the roads on the sheets before him. After only a short while, Arime nodded and turned to go—but the Warden placed his old hand on Arime's arm.

'Arime,' he said gently, 'much rests on your quest. It would ease your burden to speak that which broods within you.'

Arime shook himself free of the old man's grip. 'Swords were made to be used,' he said, not facing the Warden, 'Sundergost more than most. Now that I have the power, I will make the choices.'

'So be it,' said the old man, and led them out of the map-

room.

They left Wenfold that morning, heading east, their horses loaded with food and with Sundergost, the Sword of Hope, strapped to Arime's belt in Valkurn's scabbard.

'Go with good speed and Raendu's blessing, daughter,' said the Warden to Lonia as they paused at the beginning of the path that wound up into the mountains. 'We share a great grief, we three —you have yet to release it into the world, as has he. Be ready for it in yourself and in him, when it comes. And remember Tarazion's words —look for him in the waters of Kaela! For this world is after all but a dream: he and you and I are more real than it. I hope that I will see you yet again.'

'Oh, Warden, would that we could stay a while longer!' Lonia said. 'Can you do nothing to change Arime's mood? He seems as one possessed. How can we hope to come to peace and joy again with that shadow sitting on him?'

The Warden reached up and clasped her hand.

'I could do nothing without breaking his mind,' he said. 'He has had too much of the darkness in his life already. If he is to be a King, then that kingliness must find its way out — one may be born into the line of kings, but not all come to wear the crown with honour. His mother found that out. If there is a king in him, he must find it; if he is to come to the High Throne over all men, he must walk his own road to it.'

'Then is there as little hope as that?' said Lonia. 'Even though we have Sundergost? Is the world doomed?'

'Child, child,' said the Warden, 'would that I could put the wisdom of the years into a few words. You are caught up in

great matters, matters of the mightiest legend in Gandria; you bear the Sword Sundergost on the quest to save the world. But even those heroes of the old tales who came before you were like you and I —full of fear and weakness, and loss. Yet we stand in the sunlight because they found courage and love in the dark places. Did you not believe that no path lay before you? And yet you came forth into the daylight, did you not?’

‘But he didn’t, Warden. Tarazion perished there,’ Lonia said, gripping the old man’s hand tightly.

‘Did he? Did he indeed?’ the Warden said. ‘Then you know more than I, as I have said. What of you, Arime? Have you no words for me before you ride off to your destiny?’

Arime peered ahead into the distant mountains.

‘Warden,’ he said, ‘do not think that I am beyond your words. I do as it seems I must. Where there is a shadow it must be denied. You must see that.’

‘I do,’ replied the Warden. ‘But sometimes the greater shadow lies in an unlooked-for place, and denying it is not enough. You will walk this way again, Arime, if you live. I will see you one more time, at least, I foretell.’

‘So be it!’ said Arime, and he rode off suddenly along the path. Lonia called out a goodbye and followed him into the trees, losing the Warden and all of Wenfold behind in the greenery.

RETURN TO TARA

Mortal oaths make roads.

-Restonian proverb

As Lonía rode along the narrow mountain path that wound its lonely way up into the slopes of the mountains themselves, she sensed a stillness within her which had nothing to do with the task that lay ahead of them: it was a stillness which extended out from her to the world around.

She had dwelt under the earth and away from light for nearly three months; during that time she had changed. No longer had her eyes been the uppermost of her senses —her ears and nose had begun to tell her more about that dark world than her eyes ever could. Now those senses remained very acute —distant sounds seemed nearby, and the many aromas of tree, flower and bush were strong and fresh to her. And she noticed something else too: for as time had progressed under the stone, a less tangible but very strong feeling had grown in her that she now found it hard to describe. It was still with her, but now it was the screen upon which the shadows of the other senses played, a great blank background of solitude against which it seemed she saw the world more as it truly was. She had grown. She stopped trying to put the feeling into words —Arime was silent and unspeaking for most of that journey and she had no other companions but the horses— but she never lost that feeling, even when other events caught it up and appeared to overshadow it. She rode along entranced by the beauty of the

world of light, made more beautiful by the memory of that darkness, and for a long time her heart was at peace.

The Guardian Mountains were very high and steep and old. They had been pushed up from the surface of the earth in very ancient times until their topmost peaks brushed the sky. In their remoter parts, great slow-moving rivers of ice carved out enormous valleys over a period of centuries, and tall, unconquerable peaks peered down defiantly at the few weary travellers who crept at their feet. In the eastern part of the ranges the mountains grew together, clustered in an huge collision of rock and ice and sheer ravines, where even the hardiest of plants struggled to find a foothold—but from these heights swift streams rushed down, sweeping away stone and soil into broader valleys, and here pines and firs and grey mountain pasture grew. Lonely creatures lived upon those dizzy slopes: rams with great twisting horns, noble stags far off in the mist, eagles soaring above the cloudy depths. No men dwelt there, nor did any have cause to travel through that part of the world much: to the north lay the great Pass of the South between the Middle Lands and eastern Turgal with its mighty steppes and deserts; to the south lay unknown and uncharted lands where no man went. Those slopes, grey and silver and white in the morning sun, were left to themselves.

North-east, however, splayed out across the feet of their easternmost peaks and blocking the Pass of the South in that direction, lay the Great Marshes. The many rivers that poured down from the Guardians here met flat lowlands and were swallowed up in a half-sea of green and grey weed and wind-swept rushes, the home of thousands upon thousands

of wild birds and many other creatures. Apart from the ever-changing road from Turgal to the Middle Lands which had been driven through them by men in ages past, repaired with bridges and walls when the Marshes saw fit to reclaim it, no other known path for humankind led through them to the sea. Yet that was the way Arime sought to go—for if he could reach the coast, where dozens of rivers crossed and re-crossed in a watery labyrinth, it was a mere day's journey by sea across the great inlet which divided the Turgalin lands from the Province of Tara, and from there only a day or two's ride to Alathosa and the High Houses. He had studied the maps well, and was as certain of his course as he could be.

The days went by as they silently climbed through empty valleys warmed by spring, wading often through fresh mountain streams and clambering up slippery slopes green with new-grown grass and shining with yellow and red flowers. Everywhere there was the movement and colour of the season—butterflies danced across their path, a herd of young deer hid on the fringes of a steep forest glen as they rode by, foxes dashed from cover and startled their horses, birds sang in their multitudes in every bush and tree as they wound slowly down to the lands where the world was in full bloom—but Arime was not touched, it seemed to Lonia, by any of these things. His heart remained as hard and cold as the winter or as the darkness under the earth. She did not speak much to him, and he hardly ever to her. They sat in silence around their lonely campfires and rode in silence along the lonely path.

In this way there came a time at last when they stood at the eastern edge of the last wild pass in the Guardians and

looked down onto the eastern lands for the first time: the far east was hidden in a blanketing haze which blurred the distances, but there Lonia knew lay the vast realm of Turgal. Nearer to hand, and to the north, spreading outward from the hills below them, lay the grey-green mass of the Marshes. There also, on the horizon, glimmering in the morning light, lay the sea. Beyond that lay Tara.

Arime paused at the height of the pass, then descended quickly. Before the end of that day they had left the mountains and were in the foothills; before another day had passed they were on the edge of the Marshes.

Arime still would not let the great sword out of his sight, and often she saw him clasping it to himself as they rode along. She could take no comfort in it, and had not thought much about the Sword since Arime had removed it from the chamber beneath the earth: it seemed as dull and as dead as any sword of man, except that perhaps it shone a little more than it should in darkneses where there seemed not enough light for it. That it was Sundergost she did not doubt; but as to what good it would do them, she wondered. So far it seemed only to have closed Arime's mind and cut him off from her, and she pondered idly whether it would not be a good thing to wrest it from him while he slept and toss it into the swamp so that she might speak to him again. She still felt love for him—that did not change, and had the same quality of changelessness as the peace which had grown within her since her journey under the earth—but it was harder and harder to show that love or be certain that it was returned, as she once had thought it had been as they had stood on the faraway moors watching the dawn. She followed him now

unquestioningly, she thought, but in returning to the lands of men and to the deeds that were ahead of them, she wondered whether it would be so easy to follow so blindly, or indeed whether it was her duty to do so. Was she not also the daughter of kings? Would she be required to break her love for him in time? She dismissed these thoughts from her mind and wrapped herself in her blanket and slept an uneasy sleep.

In this silent, grim fashion they came through the Marshes, wandering in a wild world of birds and green and grey reeds until time brought them to the maze of waterways and the edge of the sea. Here they found many small boats stowed in the low dunes, the vessels of fisherfolk from Tara. Leaving gold that the Warden had given them, they took one of these, and Arime, recalling his Taran skill with boats, readied it for the water. They stayed that night near the roar of the waves, and Lonia dreaded the coming of day.

But soon it was dawn, and the morning tide took them swiftly from the shallow bay out to the high sea, tossing wildly. Lonia did not like the sea: as the light grew, she liked it less. But she found no comfort in Arime, who crouched in the bows, watching the horizon.

Arime was a practised sailor and they had no trouble in the crossing, their small sail catching the gentle southern breeze deftly. They had not long left the shore when Lonia saw the dark line of the opposite coast on the northern horizon, and she drew some comfort from the fact that it slowly drifted nearer. She felt ill for most of the voyage, but a kind of bread that the Warden had given them steadied her, and as the sun set, the land looked near enough for her to

feel normal again.

But Arime had not forgotten the other perils of their journey, for these waters were now the byway of many ships, for the most part the supply ships of the enemy, running back and forth from Tara to the Dark Isles. Even as they came near to the cliffs, the dark bulk of a ship larger than any Lonia had seen loomed up out of the shadow of the coast, and they passed, unbreathing, under its bows. Fortunately, it was both unmoving, swaying on its anchor, and unoccupied, it seemed, except for a single light burning below decks. The enemy, Lonia surmised, must consider these waters safe — after all, Tara was theirs, and no enemy they had faced possessed a fleet with the power to strike at them.

They came to shore on a small beach, overshadowed with cliffs. With effort they sheltered the boat under some rocks at the foot of the cliffs and hid there for a while. It was growing rapidly very dark. It came to Lonia how hopeless and helpless their position really was —she wondered that she had not seen it before. What did they hope to accomplish? They were not even disguised —anyone would recognise them as strangers in that land at once, from their dress and her accent alone. Had the Warden sent them on an errand to their deaths? What if Sundergost itself were seen with them?

Then she remembered that the Warden had not sent them at all —Arime had brought them. She looked on him. They had not spoken together for a long while. A different language, formed from silent understandings, had grown up between them on their long journey under the earth. She knew where not to trespass in his thought; he seemed to know what he did or did not have to speak. But since he had

set foot on Taran land once again she saw a change in him: a fire burned in his eyes, and there was an eagerness and an impatience in his actions.

'Arime,' she said, whispering, though there was no one to be seen for miles and the only sound was the slow thunder of the waves upon the beach. They were crouched behind a group of sea-washed boulders in the twilight —the red-gold sunset had vanished behind the steep headland to the west.

He turned to her.

'Arime, we must speak,' she said.

'What of?' he said.

She waited a while, thinking.

'Of everything,' she said at last. 'What we are doing here, what we hope to do, how we hope to live —even of ourselves. You have been distant for a long while.'

'Distant?' he said.

'Aye, my love. Since you came to the Sword.'

Arime shifted, turning from her and staring out to sea.

'You would not understand,' he said after a while.

'Wouldn't I? I was with you, Arime. I saw the light, and the fire, and I saw him when he sent us away from him in that horror and noise. And I am here now. You have never travelled alone, Arime, not since I first met you in the shadows of Helca's Castle in Restonia. Speak to me!'

The sea washed the shore for a long while before Arime spoke.

'It is like a fire within me,' he said, so quietly at first that Lonia had to strain to hear him above the waves. 'But it is surrounded by darkness. It is a cold, endless darkness. The fire must be kept alive or not only will I die, but all will

perish. Am I not the High King? The Warden said my shadow covered all the world.'

'Did he?' said Lonía gently. 'That does not sound like him. He is a listener, not a speaker. But Arime, listen to me! We have come this far together —I have even saved your life, and would do so again. What are we to do now? What does the Sword —what does Sundergost— tell you to do?'

Arime lifted the scabbard containing Sundergost from his side with both his hands, pulled out the sword and stared at it.

Lonía stared at it too, studying it properly for the first time: its hilt was wound with gold and studded with blue gems; from the hilt rose a sleek golden blade, engraved with tiny symbols whose meaning she did not know. It looked both light and swift, elegant and somehow fierce. But of course, it was silent.

'Nothing,' he said, 'the Sword tells me nothing. I don't think it ever has spoken to me, except in dreams. I did not listen to Tarazion because I was afraid: afraid of the darkness, but also afraid that I would miss my chance to use the Sword now that I held it in my hands. I do not know what to do now. I do not know why I came here. To save Syra, perhaps, but how? And in thinking of saving her, I lost him. There is no way of keeping the fire alight, Lonía: sooner or later the Darkness comes in and puts it out, no matter what we do. Swords do not speak. Dreams mean nothing.'

He turned to her then and she held him. He was very cold.

'Arime, Arime,' she said softly. They drew further back among the rocks, and in that way somehow slept for a few uncomfortable hours in each other's arms.

They had returned to Tara.

Before that night was over they moved further inland, through a coastland of rock and windswept heather to a wooded bay, at the foot of which twinkled the lights of a village. Fishing boats waited for the morning tide below. One by one, as they watched, the boats put out to sea with the tide, slipping noiselessly out of the small harbour. The world of men had continued, then, thought Lonia, though they had been absent from it for so long.

Arime led her deeper into the wood, and they came upon a road that led north, away from the coast and up into the more mountainous country that was the beginning of the Mountains of Morning which ran north and south along Tara's back. He knew the country, it seemed, and was heading for somewhere in particular: but he had not forgotten that Tara was a land now occupied by the enemy, and they remained in the verges by the roadside, ready to leap into hiding at the approach of any rider.

They met no one, however, and as the sun climbed in the sky they found a small dell shadowed with bracken and rested for several hours. It was two days' ride from the coast to Alathosa and the High Houses, but on foot it would take them about four, Arime explained, especially since they travelled in secret. They were heading for the Forest Lodge, a cabin in the woods at the end of the mountains that folk from the High Houses sometimes used in the winter. A family of farmers dwelt there in spring and summer, and it was a pleasant place, Arime said. He hoped to find friends there who would help him reach the High Houses —after that, he

was not sure.

Lonia noticed that Arime had begun to thaw a little: he spoke more willingly and openly to her now, and laughed and smiled more easily. Beneath, though, she sensed still the untouched and hardened core of sorrow which drove him on: and his hand seemed never to leave the hilt of Sundergost at his side.

They found food in the woods —Lonia with her bow in this way supplemented their rations with rabbit and pigeon and other small game— and, as they had still met no one, and as the spring sunshine continued, and was warm and bright, hastening the meadows into flower, she could almost believe that they had returned to Arime's home in peace, with her as his guest. As they walked, he spoke of the history of the realm, and of the many places he would take her, and she listened with a lightness of heart —but they spoke in whispers, and travelled mostly in the half-light or darkness, heedful of any sound or movement, and her hand was never far from her sword or bow.

In this way, they came to the first foothills of the Mountains of Morning, and there followed a swift-flowing river up into a steep valley which opened out as it rose into a higher plateau of green forest. Here, Arime grew even more cautious, and they crept forward in the early hours of the morning until they looked down on a large farmhouse built of rich red wood, the first dwelling of men they had seen since the fishing village on the coast. Smoke rose from it, and Lonia at first thought all was well, until Arime gripped her arm, freezing her into stillness, and she heard cries, and saw that the smoke did not rise from a chimney, but from the

thatch of the roof.

The cries were those of a woman in distress, and a man in pain. As they watched, they saw a horseman dragging something behind him at a gallop across a green enclosure: it was a man, bound by his wrists. The rider laughed cruelly as he rode—he appeared drunk, and swung a great flagon of wine about as he went. The woman came into view, running from the lodge, but she was pursued by another of the men—both were armoured, Lonia now saw, and wore the livery of blood-red which signified the pirate-warriors of the Dark Isles, the Reavers whose envy of Tara and desire for the spoils of that realm were now being satiated, it seemed. Lonia felt Arime grow tense with fury, and heard him draw Sundergost from its sheath.

‘Wait!’ she whispered. ‘We do not know how many there are.’

Arime waited, and the riding man slowed to a halt, dragging his now-unconscious burden back to the lodge where three other warriors now emerged from within, dragging with them a young girl.

‘Orissa!’ muttered Arime. ‘It is Orissa and her family! I knew them as a child—we used to come here in the winter.’

‘Let us quickly scout the area,’ said Lonia. ‘I will skirt the wood and see how many there are. When the sun rises above the treetops, we will meet again here.’

Arime looked at her. There was a mixture of terror and anger in his face, Lonia thought, but beneath it something else, something firmer than both. For the first time he looked to her like a young king. She bent to kiss him lightly on the forehead, and was gone.

It was a matter of moments before she stood on the other side of the mountain glade. From that position she could count four steeds tethered at the back of the lodge —four plus the one that the rider used meant that there were no more than five of them: a foraging party from the valleys below, most likely, she thought. She had heard the tales of the Reavers, and the dread of their cruelty had reached even Restonia over the mountains —but she knew also that they were for the most part cowardly fighters, taking comfort in overwhelming numbers, and striking savagely and without honour in war. But she and Arime were only two, and young, and inexperienced in battle. These men were, it seemed, seasoned: they walked with the swagger of conquerors, and looked much older. The one on the horse seemed to be their leader —he barked orders to the others in a language she did not understand, not helped by his slurring of words as he dismounted, spilling wine.

The older woman now pleaded with him to let her attend the man tied to the horse, her husband, Lonía guessed —but the captain laughed and struck her until she fell to the earth. Another rider made to mount the horse. As she watched, creeping closer to the walls of the lodge, he rode off, dragging the man again around the field. The others turned to the daughter Orissa —an argument of some kind broke out among them and the girl was tossed and pulled back and forth between them. Some blows were exchanged. Then the girl was thrown to the earth.

Lonía looked east towards the sun. It would soon rise over the trees. She had to start back around the glade to meet Arime. But her heart, beating quickly, faltered —if she were

to retreat now, great evil could be done: what were they to do?

Suddenly, the captain drew his long sword —she could see its barbed blade glittering in the light. The other Reavers fell back from him and drew their own. The captain held the girl and brought the sword to her throat; she struggled, but his grip was strong. He snapped out an order. The others faltered; two came forward to his side, the third remained defiant. There was some kind of disagreement between them then, Lonia thought, probably over the girl. In the meantime, the rider had returned to the front of the lodge with his burden. The defiant Reaver lowered his sword and said something. The captain laughed and turned his attention to the girl. She tried to twist free, but he flung her to the ground next to her mother, and began to advance on her.

An arrow whizzed from Lonia's bow through the air in that moment —the rider, who had been dismounting, struggled to pull it from his shoulder and fell to the earth. The others turned. Another arrow bit into the thigh of one of them, and he fell with a cry. The captain raised his head to cry out, but at that instant it was severed from his shoulders: Arime, appearing from the other side of the lodge and moving with a speed quicker than the wind, had leapt upon him. The others yelled out and fled —another fell before he reached the door of the building, an arrow through his throat. The last made it inside and slammed the door —but he had forgotten, it seemed, that the roof of the lodge was on fire, and that the building was filled with smoke. He came out again, swordless, arms raised.

Lonia, breathless, rushed to Arime where he stood over

the Reaver captain. Arime's eyes were glazed, his breathing hard. Sundergost smoked with blood in his hand. They did not speak. The girl Orissa and her mother stood and ran to the man behind the horse, untying him.

As the sun rose over the trees the lodge was in flames: two Reavers were tied and bound together, the others' lifeless bodies were thrown into the flames. For a long while neither the rescuers nor the rescued spoke. Then, as he recovered consciousness and was told of what had occurred by his wife, the lodge-keeper spoke from where he lay by the stream that ran through the glade.

'I know you, do I not?' he said to Arime, who was watching the smoke rise into the morning sky. Arime had not yet sheathed Sundergost and seemed in a trance. He did not speak or turn.

'Aye, you would know him,' said Lonia, binding the man's wounds where he had been cut, 'for he is your rightful prince. He is Arime, son of Ryna.'

'Arime!' said the man.

Arime turned to him then.

'Aye, Gladrae,' he said, 'I came here not two winters ago. Have I changed so much?'

'Aye, sire,' Gladrae replied, 'for then you were but a boy. Now you are a prince indeed.'

'Because I have killed a man? Does this change the look of a man so swiftly?'

'Nay, Arime,' said Gladrae. 'Killing, they say, does not make a man, but removes from him. But your eyes tell me you have seen many things since your winter here.'

Arime nodded slowly and looked away.

‘How quickly could we reach the High Houses from here, travelling by mountain roads, Gladrae?’ he said after a moment.

The lodgekeeper thought.

‘Now that we have their horses, less than two days by the mountain paths. But I can offer you little else: my house is burned and they had already taken my animals and most of our food before even this band of villains arrived with the dawn. Raendu be praised that you came when you did! I, and my family, are forever in your debt, prince. But are you alone?’

Arime nodded, and saw the look of wonder in the wife’s and daughter’s faces.

‘Then you are a brave man, Prince Arime, to take on five Reavers with a sword and a bow, even if the wielder of the bow is so fair and firm a lady,’ Gladrae said, nodding to Lonia.

‘This is Princess Lonia of Restonia over the mountains, and she is my most beloved companion and a warrior in her own right. And the sword I bear is no ordinary sword,’ said Arime, lifting up the blade. It was stained still with the blood of the Reaver captain.

The sunlight caught it as he held it aloft, saying:

‘Behold, Sundergost, the Sword of Hope, returned from the darkness of the past to reclaim the future.’

Then he lowered it, and said in a more humble voice, ‘And yet I do not know how that is to be done —and today I have killed a man, and the blood marks it still.’

Gladrae and his family were quiet then, and in awe. Arime walked off to the edge of the glade while Lonia tended their

cuts and wounds.

'I mark the shadow of great perils endured on him, noble princess —and perhaps on you, too,' Gladrae said to her. 'I will not ask your quest, but if there is anything that I can provide or do to make it easier upon you both, ask it of me. Tara groans under the burden of these evil folk, but its people cry out for a sign or a call to arms —you have come with Raendu's blessing, I doubt that not.'

'Perhaps,' replied Lonía and she said no more.

The fire burned all that morning, but the women and Arime brought out of the flames all that was of worth in the house, and they also untethered the Reavers' horses and brought them down to the stream —stolen beasts, Arime saw, for the Reavers were not horsemen in their Dark Isles, and had taken these from elsewhere. They were glad to be freed, and soon calmed. Three Arime left with Gladrae to take the lodgekeeper's family and goods to a hut in the mountains where they would be out of reach of the marauding bands which plundered the realm —two he kept for their journey.

He did not speak much of the journey to the family. Lonía saw that they interpreted this easily to be a matter too high and mysterious for them, the province of kings; but Lonía knew the truth: they had themselves no clear idea of what it was they were going to do, even if they reached the High Houses in safety. Alathosa and the surrounding country was the most heavily occupied in the land, Gladrae told them, though they had already guessed that it would be —and the High Houses themselves were surrounded by an armed host. At least ten thousand Reavers had taken the land around

there for themselves, plundering and burning, reserving the best houses and farms, fighting over their spoils, driving out the Tarans to become slaves or wandering beggars. Tara was the place of preparation for the great hosts which were sweeping into Shand through the northern and southern passes; armies arrived from the Dark Isles and Turgal each week. The last time Gladrae had heard news, Baladac, who had crowned himself High King of Shand already, was due to return to Tara soon to meet his mightiest fleet from his homeland across the sea. Then his hold on Tara would be complete, and his strategy could be brought to its successful end—the rebellious and resistant Shandrian armies would be finally crushed, and he would be free to wed and begin a new, dark dynasty.

Gloom closed in on Lonia at this news. She knew that their task was hopeless, but hearing the details from Gladrae had confirmed that hopelessness: while she had not known the facts, it was possible, in some dim recess of thought, to imagine the best. Now it was only her faith in Arime which kept her going—but no, she thought, was it even that? True, he had proved himself to a degree as a warrior, but that was not what held her to him, nor had it ever seemed important. No, it was not faith that held her to Arime, she now saw—it was a choice made long ago. Perhaps all mortals are held only by such choices, she thought—decisions which then hold fast under fire or sword, the breaking of which breaks the spirit which made them.

They bade goodbye to the family on a lonely track which wound away to the north above the lodge and above the forests of pine which thickly clad the foothills there. Gladrae,

though not fully recovered from his ordeal, bent down on one knee and received Arime's blessing.

'You make an old man young again, my prince,' he said, rising with a new brightness in his eye. 'Would that I could ride with you!'

'I ride to greater danger and more hopeless ends than you know, my friend, and mayhap you will not see me again,' Arime replied.

'I never thought to see the light of any day again, my liege—nor the Sword of Hope, even in dreams. I may yet live to see the boy be crowned who once danced by my hearth. Life, like dreams, has a way of surprising us,' said Gladrae.

They parted, Gladrae and his family riding south, laden with what goods they had salvaged, Arime and Lonia turning north. They had soon turned round a ridge in the land and were gone.

Arime became now as grim as before, but with a new purpose. As Lonia watched him, she saw that he rode not as one possessed or haunted by darkness who desperately fuels his own fire to keep the shadows at bay, as he had done on their ride from Wenfold to the Marshes, but as one driven like a forest fire through dry pine in a high wind, burning with fuel aplenty. He now looked to her like Arime, Prince of Tara, riding with sword to reclaim his throne. Would that he had ten thousand other swords with him, she thought—perhaps they would be led by a man such as he now. But the swords of Tara were scattered, her warriors defeated and enslaved; who knew what was occurring in Turgal, far away? If Baladac expected a fleet, then surely any hope of rebellion there was dead?

Nevertheless, they rode on, through high paths and pine trees, travelling by night until, one evening as the full moon was rising, they came to the juncture of a road. It climbed from below and disappeared into the mountains which now towered on their left; Lonia could see a distant bay in the sea on their right. The moonlight shone steadily on the ocean, stars glinted above, no sound came to them from the forest. These roads were deserted.

‘There lies Alathosa,’ said Arime in a whisper, ‘and by this road I left Tara in what seems like a different age of the world.’

Not resting, they crept cautiously down through the forest, leaving the road except where it leapt across gullies or wound through otherwise impassable valleys, steep and filled with swift water. Darkness and silence enclosed them, and they went slowly, listening all the time for the sound of any rider on the road, for, as Arime explained, this was the road that led from the High Houses to the high pass by which he had crossed into the western lands, and it was possibly used by messengers travelling from the wars that Baladac pursued there.

In this way they wound slowly down into the lower foothills. They soon stood on the same plateau from which Arime had looked out on his realm with Tarazion as he had left it: it looked much the same, he muttered to Lonia, and the bay of Alathosa looked at peace in the silvery light, except that he counted many masts of ships of war there, and the fishermen, it seemed, were gone.

They hid swiftly as a group of four darkly-clad riders

swept by, heading east down the road. Messengers, Lonia thought. She looked at their own ragged cloaks —they would not pass for heralds or errand-riders of Baladac: they looked more like beggars after their long travels in the wild. But they had no choice, it seemed, but to ride on.

No sentries were posted on this road, Lonia noted — Baladac was confident in his conquests, and feared no hostile rider coming this way. Indeed, she thought, their whole journey had been unmarked, as far as they could tell, for it came by unexpected roads. She wondered how close to their destination they would get after all, before they perished.

The moon had set when they reached the end of the sheltering pine woods. There Lonia was breathtaken by her first sight of the High Houses of Tara, standing out proudly against the Mountains of Morning at their back. Even in the darkness before dawn she could see the graceful curve of the towers, the battlements, the climbing terraces of stone. Never had that fortress fallen in war, Arime said, and even now it was in enemy hands only through the treachery of his sister.

They dismounted now and left the road, moving carefully through fields at the feet of the great castle. There they saw a huge ring of encampments, tents and crude huts, which had sprung up around that place, and many watchfires burned, though they could still hear nothing. They looked out from the shelter of a spinney as the grey light waxed in the east — only by that mountain road could they have come so close, but now, it appeared, they could go no further.

Arime looked up at the great walls for some time without speaking, then turned to Lonia.

'Lonia,' he said, 'I know of the secret ways into the High

Houses —or at least, one of the entrances. This has been my secret, and I have spoken of it to no one. It was how he brought me out, on the night I left Tara.'

Lonia knew that Arime meant Tarazion, though he had never mentioned the one-eyed man by name since they had lost him in the Underworld. She nodded.

'The trick then,' Arime went on, 'is to get to the point of entrance. Once inside, I think that I could find my way to the innermost upper chambers, there to find Syra perhaps. After that, I do not know. I think the entrance is at the foot of this nearest tower, beyond those tents and behind that fire.'

'You think? Are you not certain?' whispered Lonია.

Arime paused and shook his head.

'It seems like long ago,' he said, 'and at the time I was led through the darkness in a half-dream. Now it seems the darkness of the night is more familiar to me.' He smiled, grimly.

Lonia said nothing but watched as they saw a patrol of armed men stroll in front of the fire, three hundred yards in front of them. The light of the dawn was growing, and shadows were beginning to form. Lonია had not slept for over a day, but she had the feeling that time was slipping through her fingers with the rising sun.

Arime turned to her suddenly.

'Lonia,' he said, 'it may be that we shall perish this morning, both or one of us. I have brought you far from your home to this. For the most part I have acted like a fool and imperilled more than I know even now. I would have you know that the words I spoke on the Moor hold true for me: I love you indeed and would take you for my queen. But I free

you from all promises!

'Speak not of such freedoms!' she said at once. 'To be free from certain oaths is to wander from the road they carve, as they say in Restonia. I love you, Arime. Know that—even if you see death itself in my face, know that I love you!'

They embraced as the first rays of the sun touched the mountain peaks above and fell on the golden banner of the prince of Turgal as it fluttered in the dawn breeze on the topmost battlements. Arime saw it.

'So, Baladac is indeed here!' he said, and they turned to face the growing noise and flurry of movements as the camp before them stirred.

Guards were changed, men moved through the early shadows to tents to eat, riders rode into camp. With little thought of a plan, Arime and Lonia tethered their own horses near a small stream that ran by the spinney and crept along a gully until they were close to the confusion. A fire close by them was being put out by a burly man dressed in the livery of a Reaver soldier. He turned and saw them.

'Ho there! Beggars and thieves!' he shouted. 'Put out this fire for me and I'll see that you get some scraps for your trouble! If I don't hurry the bread will be eaten!'

They clambered out of the gully, walking as though sick and weary, and in that way masking their swords from the man's gaze. He handed them an old bucket and rushed off, scarcely sparing them a glance. They made some pretence of putting out the fire as others went by, then dashed through the lines and huddled by the wall of the Houses.

Arime led Lonia on silently. A road swept by the wall ahead of them, and a troop of riders clattered down it as they

huddled by the stone, cloaks cast over their heads. Some harsh words in the Reaver tongue were spoken, and someone spat at them, but then the riders were gone, and Arime crept on.

They came this way, in a halting and anxious fashion, to a mass of bushes by the curve of the tower. Into these Arime vanished, and Lonía plunged in after him. She emerged, scratched and weary, in a dark and cold hollow under the bushes, the foot of the tower at her back. There they waited for some time as the sun climbed up into the spring sky. They were tired, and had been forced to leave their packs with all their remaining food behind. Lonía shivered. But after a while, Arime scabbled at the stone behind her and she turned to see a hole leading down a dark slope into the depths under the wall. Arime was already sliding down it. She followed.

She passed under a stone archway into deeper darkness. A low tunnel, earthy and wet to the touch, wound away in front of her. She shuffled down it. Arime whispered to her to feel for some steps. Her foot met stone and she began climbing slowly upwards. The roof of the tunnel lifted, and she found that she could stand. It was pitch-black, though, and the air was still and very cold. After what seemed like hours she stopped and sat down on the steps. Arime whispered something to her —she could not tell what— and he was gone. She fell asleep.

When she awoke it was with a jumble of images skipping and flowing through her mind: she dreamt that she was still in the Underworld, but had fallen asleep and imagined that she had emerged from the endless caverns, to pass through

great mountains, wide marshes, and even to cross the sea, which she had never seen, she thought. But no —it did not make sense. Where was she? She opened her eyes and looked around. The tunnel was dark like the Underworld, but there were steps under her feet, steps carved for mortals, by mortal hands. Where was Arime? She called out weakly —she realised she felt very weak and cold and hungry— and heard her voice echo around what seemed to be a narrow passage.

Arime answered her, coming down the steps in the darkness. She could not see him, but she clung onto him. He was putting food into her hands, hot food. She ate it hungrily—it was meat, and fresh bread.

‘I have been exploring,’ whispered Arime, as he too ate. ‘These tunnels wind between the walls of the whole castle. There are many doors, perhaps into all of the proper rooms. It took me a while to work them, but I managed it at the last—and as a reward, found this food in the kitchens! I cannot steal what is rightfully mine, can I?’ He laughed. Lonia had forgotten that sound —his heart seemed lighter than she could remember. It was as though, in reaching the High Houses, the great burden of their journey had left him: she did not ask what came next. Strength and warmth returned to her as she ate.

Having eaten, they rested for a while.

‘Do you know the time outside the walls?’ she asked.

‘No, but I would guess it to be the evening of the day we entered the tunnel,’ he replied. ‘I think I know where Syra’s chambers are from here. I must go there.’

‘What do you hope to do?’

‘I must speak with her. She has the heart of a traitor, I

know, but I think I understand her better now. Perhaps I can reach her through the darkness. It must have been as hard for her as it was for me, growing up with the shadow of evil so close. I must speak with her!

‘And if she will not listen?’

‘I do not think she will betray me —not now, now that I have Sundergost. Do you not see? It was because we lacked the power that each of us fell prey to the darkness within us —she, being older, walked further down that path. But I have it now! She will see Hope, see it unsheathed before her. Then she will not need Baladac or the Morndred or their servants. She will be redeemed, and I will forgive her!’

Lonia said nothing. She felt a cold dread creep over her every sense. She gripped Arime’s hand in the darkness.

‘Do not go, Arime! I fear it!’ she said.

‘Fear what? The shadow is within us, my love, it cannot truly harm us. And we have Sundergost!’ he said, stroking her hair.

After a while he said, ‘Come!’ and led her further up the stair.

The passages were a maze in the darkness. Every few steps, another tunnel branched off into nothingness. From some of the openings a warmer air flowed, as though heat had found a way in through cracks in the outer stone or from some furnace inside, but for the most part the blackness was filled with stillness and silence. As they climbed, Arime pointed out thin slivers of light in the walls —the sign that there lay a door into a new chamber. In time they came to places where she could look through and see glimpses of the interior of the castle: from one hole she looked down on a

great hall, empty but for a long table of dark wood. Through another she saw soldiers gaming with coloured stones, and heard their faint voices through the thick stone.

Arime led her on. They must have risen above the lower chambers now, she thought, and be climbing round through the outer wall of a tower —the passage curved away above her, and a thin, greyish light filtered through from somewhere. It was a very narrow passage now, both walls brushing against her ragged cloak as she walked. Arime drew her on, eagerly.

Either the cracks through which the light had fallen ceased, or night fell outside. Lonia was exhausted. They both rested for a while on the narrow steps. Dim, distant noises of life in the castle could be heard from behind the walls and beneath them. Somewhere horns rang out.

Suddenly, Arime stood up above her.

'It is time,' he whispered. 'I must go on. She is waiting for me. Lonia, if I do not return, make your way back to the Warden at Wenfold. You will be safest with him.'

Lonia looked up but could not see his face.

'I am afraid, Arime,' she said.

He touched her face.

'May thou yet be my queen,' he said softly, in the High Tongue. 'I will remember thy words —even were I to see death in thy face I would recall thy love for me. Raendu watch over us!'

She could not tell for a few moments if he had gone or not. She whispered his name but there was no response. Carefully, she followed him.

The tunnel went on, upward. A faint light showed ahead.

As her eyes grew used to it, she could see that a long, thin crack in the wall was letting into the passage the finest trickle of light. She could see Arime's eye looking through it into the room beyond. Creeping near, yet not so near that he would hear or see her, she also put her eye to it and peered.

In the chamber, alone as far as she could tell, sat a young woman. She was very beautiful, Lonia thought, but it was a cold beauty—her face was pale, and her dark hair bound up with many silver pins. She was dressed in a rich blue silk, and sat working on a tapestry by the light of a strong lamp. The long needle glinted in the lamplight as her fine, white fingers threaded the strands through and out again, through and out.

Lonia knew at once that this was Syra. Apart from the sisterly similarity of feature with Arime, she could tell that here was a lady who regarded herself as royal in her every vein, as one fit to rule over the lesser folk. Even the way she threaded the tapestry spoke of it: a fineness, a precision of manner, and a hardness which ran deep in every movement. Yet Lonia, as she watched unobserved through the crack, was not filled with fear, nor loathing, still less resentful jealousy, as she herself thought she might have been. For there was something in Syra beneath even this ruling streak. At first, Lonia could not tell what it was—then she saw it. Syra was like a child, a little girl, hiding behind the rich robes of an older, wiser, more beautiful and crueller person. And so what Lonia felt, when she at last looked upon Arime's sister, was pity. And with that pity came a sudden understanding of Arime himself, and the mixture of feelings which had driven him here, against Tarazion's words, against any chance of

success, against all sense: hope, not for himself, but for her, hope of redemption.

She watched breathlessly, both unable and unwilling to stop him now, as Arime found the secret lever and opened the door of stone into Syra's chamber. She watched as Syra looked up astonished for a moment by the sliding, grating stone, amazed as her brother stepped out of the darkness and stood before her, and then Lonia saw how instantly she recovered herself, how quickly the long-sewn veil hid her true face, how coldly she put the tapestry to one side.

'Arime,' she said, 'so you come back to me at last.'

THE TWISTED MIRROR

*Seven were the Fireswords of Turgal,
And the third was borne by Baladac, its
Blade bloodied and its blaze undimmed—but
The Flame of Urbitor had not yet flickered
Against the gold of the Sword Sundergost.*

-from The Song of Sundergost by Colomain of Rondar.

Arime stepped forward, further into the room. Lonia remained where she was, hidden in the shadows of the passage, watching and listening.

‘I had long suspected that there were passages between the walls here,’ Syra was saying. ‘Your old guardian —what was his name? How foolish of me to misplace him, was he not here but a short while ago? He knew of them, I was sure. But I could never discover the secret of them, and after all, I’ve had so much more on my mind than these child’s things. But Arime! You are as worn and weary-looking as a beggar! Is this what you have come to? Is this where he has led you? When you could have been ruling the whole of Tara, aye, and more besides, if you had but listened to me, and waited. Arime, I am astonished, I am delighted to see you again! Do you come alone?’

Arime stood as one entranced in the middle of the chamber. He spoke falteringly.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘yes, I am alone.’

‘And how did you come here? And through what horrors have you journeyed? I see it in your face. He has led you into

the shadows, has he not? Far from the light of the mortal world. Come and sit, my love, sit by me!

She patted the soft cushions where she sat. It was as though, Lonia thought behind the wall, she had seen Arime playing in the castle courtyard like a child, and was gently chiding him. Her voice was like an enchantment, musical and commanding. In its sound, all other concerns drifted away, reduced in importance and half-forgotten. Lonia felt her blood chill: would Arime fall under its spell? Did he not already seem enchanted?

He walked slowly and stiffly nearer to Syra, but did not sit down.

‘How you have grown!’ she said, looking at him. ‘You are indeed almost a man now. Come, sit by me! Tell me of your adventures! Can I get you anything? Food, wine, fresh clothes? Water to bathe in? It is long since you bathed, is it not?’

Arime shook his head and stroked his face with his hand. He looked very dirty and weary. It was almost surprising that Syra had recognised him at all, Lonia thought.

‘I have come... to speak with you,’ he said slowly, sinking into a nearby cushion at last.

‘Yes?’ said his sister, sitting forward, her blue robes shimmering in the lamplight.

‘I come to speak of the Darkness,’ he went on quietly, ‘the Darkness I knew you must have felt too.’

She was pouring him wine into a silver goblet. He took it and sipped at it.

‘I...I do not know how to begin now that I am here,’ he said.

‘That does not surprise me,’ Syra said. ‘From the little I know of such things, an enchantment can take much time to wear off, and leaves the victim confused, bewildered. Good food and some wine, and rest among friends will set things aright. But speak to me now if it will ease your heart.’

‘Enchantment?’ muttered Arime.

‘Oh yes,’ Syra said, handing him a small plate with breadcakes on it. ‘You will not see it, perhaps not for a long while, but that much is clear —you have been enchanted. Perhaps you even came here to kill me, or fight with me. Such is the way with enchanters, setting brother against sister, mother against son, spreading false tales and wicked lies. But I have remained strong. I have not listened to the lies he told me of you, Arime. I refused to believe them, and he hated me for it. And now you have come back to me, I will not believe that you can raise your hand against me! You love me too much!’

‘Yes... I love you, Syra. That is why I came.’

‘I know, Arime, I know. Love is stronger than spells, is it not? I could have told you that! You needn’t have wandered the world like a beggar seeking love, Arime! It was here all the time, but you could not see it!’

Arime looked around the room —rich tapestries hung from each wall. A high window stood open to the stars. A great bed, draped with coloured silks, stood in the centre of the room. Lonia followed his gaze as much as she could. She looked more closely at the tapestries —they were indeed beautiful, but as she looked she began to see what they depicted: twisting, hideous forms, writhing together in some terrible ecstasy or agony, burning in endless circles. She saw

Arime shake his head drowsily, as though he was falling asleep. He is failing, Lonia thought. She will bewitch him.

Suddenly, Arime stood up and flung the silver goblet across the room. It landed with a clatter outside the circle of lamplight. He turned to face his sister.

'No!' he cried. 'No, not again! I will not be enslaved! Listen to me Syra, listen to me for your sake, not my own. I did come back because I loved you. I came back because I wanted to save you from the terrible evil that they're planning to do to you. Don't you understand? You are the one in danger, not I! Can't you see how far you've walked down the path to them? Come with me, Syra, come back along the way you've come!'

Syra sat unmoving, her fingers twisting at the many rings on her hands, watching him.

'Arime, Arime,' she said at last, 'I merely walked the way ahead, the path that lay at my feet.' Her voice was different, as though the rock at the bed of the musical river of her speech was beginning to show through.

'But don't you see where it's brought you?' he cried. 'To evil, and despair, and shadows!'

Syra seemed to recover herself, her voice becoming soft and melodious again.

'Arime, you speak to me of evil, and shadows. But I see these things in your face. Where have you been? What dark things have you seen?'

'I'll tell you where I've been,' he cried, throwing back his cloak. 'I've been under the world. I've been to the Dragon's kingdom. And I have brought forth this!'

So saying, he unsheathed Sundergost, and the flash of the

lamplight in its golden blade flickered across the room. Lonia watched Syra —she froze for a moment, her false face dropped: there, beneath it, was the terrified child for a brief instant. Then hatred swallowed up that look, and the unseen veil was drawn again.

‘Sundergost,’ she said warily, looking at the Sword. ‘So, it is real, then. You have indeed walked strange roads, Arime. I wonder where they will lead you.’

‘Syra, listen!’ Arime went on. ‘I know what you’ve done, I know what they’ve done to you. But it’s not too late now. We have the Sword, the Sword of Hope! We have the power now! Come with me! We can flee from Tara, gather an army of our own. We can return to throw down this usurper-prince and his evil brood. Come with me!’

Syra was silent for a moment, her eyes moving from the Sword to her brother’s face with a mixture of revulsion and shock and sinister calmness.

‘Know what I’ve done?’ she said at last. ‘How can you know that? You may have walked in the Dragon-kingdom, my brother, but there are greater darknesses closer to home. I suppose I cannot expect you to throw away such a bauble now to return to me. I had hoped that you and I might be reconciled, but I see you have gone too far away from me. You have been taken from me, Arime, taken as our mother was taken —into the world of lies and emptiness and powerlessness where others would lead you. No, Arime, I’ll not go with you. I’ll stay with the things I know, the things that know me.’

There was a silence. Arime was breathing hard, almost weeping. Lonia could see him struggling for more words, but

they would not come. She imagined the great turmoil that must be raging in his mind: was it true, what she was saying? The power of her voice would make him doubt, she felt. Was everything, his mother's love, Tarazion's words, the hope of the Sword, was it all meaningless? Syra was staring at the floor now, cold and stern again.

Then Arime was still and looked at her.

'So be it,' he said quietly, and began edging back to the passage. Then Syra sat forward and looked at him. Lonia could see, she realised with a shock, the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

'Arime,' she said quietly, like a little girl, 'do not go.'

Arime faltered, Sundergost low in his hand. He stopped. There was a deep silence. Lonia felt that that silence was full of unspoken hope, as fragile and free as light, as strained as a distant note of long-unheard music.

Then suddenly there came a great booming knock on the door of the chamber. A voice rang out.

'My lady! Is all well?'

Syra stood, turned, and was calm once more. The voice and face of the little girl had gone again. The moment had passed.

'Indeed, my lord,' she cried out. 'Enter and rejoice! For my kin gathers for our crowning as King and Queen!'

The door opened and a very tall, broad man entered, clad in rich robes and wearing a silver coronet above a dark face ravaged by war. He stood gaping at Arime in the lamplight.

'What is the meaning of this intrusion into the Queen's bedchamber?' he boomed, drawing his sword.

'My lord, put up your blade!' Syra interrupted, floating

across the room to him. 'This is none other than Arime, my brother, returned out of great darkness and evil, to my rejoicing. Arime, may I present His Highness King Baladac of Shand, Emperor of Turgal, Protector of Tara —and my husband.'

Baladac's dark face changed from fury, to shock, to a cruel delight in the space of an instant. He bowed, mockingly.

'Your... husband?' muttered Arime. Lonia could not see his face from where she watched.

'Why, yes, my brother! Did I not explain? Baladac and I were wed with the solstice. I am the High Queen now. We wait only for our Coronation this midsummer.'

Arime staggered backwards, half-thinking to run for the passage, but he was too slow. Two large armoured guards had entered with Baladac and at a sign from him, surrounded Arime, their short swords drawn.

'Beware, he is enchanted,' came Syra's voice. 'And he bears a weapon of great evil from the dark places of the world!'

'Indeed!' said Baladac, peering at the Sword in the light of the lamp. 'Is this not the fabled Golden Sword that your western tales tell of? Though it is indeed an evil thing, being a god-slayer, it is a beauteous blade!'

'And it will slice off the hand of any man that tries to take it from me!' cried Arime.

'Come, Arime,' said Syra, 'I would not have your blood spilled needlessly. You are weary and outnumbered. Surrender the Sword now and you will live, by my plea with my lord and husband the King. Fight, and you will face the entire Royal Guard alone. Be sensible!'

Arime swooned suddenly. Lonia saw him lurch forward. She had been about to step out into the light herself, to be slain with him, intending at the least to slay the treacherous sister before she was brought down herself, but now she paused. Was Arime poisoned? She thought of the wine Syra had given him —drugged? He collapsed heavily on the floor, Sundergost ringing on the flagstones.

Baladac signed to the guards to pick him up. They dragged him out of the room. The dark usurper-king turned to his wife.

‘Thou art full of wonders, my love,’ he said, bowing a little to her. ‘Whence came he?’

‘From yonder passage —there is a veritable web of them through the palace, as I’ve said before. Perhaps now we shall have their secrets, too.’

Baladac made for the entrance to the tunnel, and Lonia silently drew her sword ready to slay him. But he paused.

‘So —your brother, the accursed Ryna’s son,’ he said, and then he bent down to examine the Sword. ‘And the Golden Sword? Where I bring home entire realms, you bring home the jewels with which to adorn the triumph, eh?’

He stooped to pick it up and then cried out and flung it from him. Lonia saw his hand burn and smelled the smoke of it.

‘Ah!’ he yelled. ‘The accursed thing burns! It burns like a red-hot coal!’

Syra ignored her husband’s wound and looked down at the Sword where it had fallen. Gathering great cloths from the bed she dragged it onto a small table.

‘There!’ she said. ‘Now you may take it away. It is a thing

of great power. Perhaps we may find a use for it yet. But be wary of it —for with its release into the world, they say great change comes to the affairs of mortals. It is fortuitous that it should fall into our hands —it is a mighty token of old.'

'It is an abomination before the sight of Gon-rinin!' snapped Baladac. 'Does not the legend say that it slew him a thousand years ago? I will have it smashed into a thousand pieces and melted into water!'

'You may not find it that easy to destroy,' Syra said. 'They say it was made from the tooth of the father of Dragons. I fear its power —that it has returned to the affairs of the world, as I say, may change more than we know. In the west they call it the Sword of Hope.'

'Then Hope itself shall be broken,' said Baladac, picking up the table on which Sundergost lay shrouded. 'I shall return to discuss your brother's fate, my lady,' he added, moving towards the door.

'He must be put to death,' said Syra calmly. 'But it must be done publicly, as a humiliation to all that he represents. Perhaps it can be contrived that he can be slain with his own sword? That should destroy enough hope for you.'

Baladac smiled.

'You are most suited for the motherhood for which you have been prepared,' he said, kissing the blue crystal ring that she offered to him.

'Begone, now, my lord. I would rest. It has been a wearying night's events,' she said, and he bowed again and was gone.

Lonia stayed in the darkness, trying desperately not to weep and thereby make a noise. Syra seemed to have

forgotten the open passage for the moment. She had gone to the other side of the room and was staring at one of the hanging tapestries. Night and silence descended once more, and with them despair fell like a shroud over Lonia. She was alone now. Arime had gone, and the Sword Sundergost had been taken —what more was there to do but perish?

But if she were to die, she thought, she would at least take comfort in vengeance. She listened as the thunder of an approaching storm echoed to her from outside. As she stood there, sinking beyond tears into deathly resolve, it began to rain and the tapestries of the chamber flapped and floated in the wind that sprang up.

Lonia listened more carefully —had she heard a voice above the storm? Yes, there were muttered words as Syra said something aloud to herself.

'Oh, gods!' she cried, now loud enough for Lonia to hear clearly, 'thou art cruel! Would that thou would tear from my heart that part that still quails within me from thy will! I looked on my brother and felt love for him still, despite all my foreswearing of love; and this Sword he brings fills me with terror. Oh, gods, gods, gods —I fear the darkness even now! Why dost thou still torment me with this shred, this worthless rag, of humanity? Why do I still feel pain? If I should once more feel regret, may I be cast from the battlements! Send me thy instrument that I may cut out my heart from me and feel remorse no more!'

And then, as Lonia listened, Syra wept. It was a deep weeping, the tears of one whose soul was racked with a grief greater than physical pain. It was the cry of someone who had lost herself, who had gone beyond redemption, and who

felt that loss —and Lonia felt pity rise within her again at the mere sound of it. But she pushed the pity back down into her heart and gripped her sword.

Lightning flashed across the battlements and through the tall window into the chamber; thunder followed it. Rain lashed the stone, and a huge tapestry fell from the wall. Syra cried out and fell to her knees —and when she looked up, Lonia was standing there, her naked sword gleaming.

Syra's weeping ceased instantly.

'Who...?' she said, and Lonia knew that Syra was not used to feeling such a fear as she now felt, however familiar her inner terrors might be to her. She had long been protected from the hatred of swords.

'I am that which thou hast called upon,' said Lonia quietly, in the High Tongue. 'I am the instrument of thine evil gods, sent to tear remorse from thy heart. This is my instrument.'

Syra visibly trembled, but fought to recover herself.

'No! No! You came with him, didn't you? You came with my brother!' she cried out, rising and backing away. 'You are the filth who took him from me, the sluttish worm of Restonia! You are nothing but a she-beast, a sow of the western fields. You are not from the gods! Too long have you chewed your swine-food, sow —it's time for your slaughter!' hissed Syra, circling Lonia like a cat about to spring.

'Thou lost Arime long ago, Syra,' replied Lonia, her sword steady in her hand, 'along with thyself.'

Syra spat.

'I'm going to enjoy slaughtering you, sow,' she said. 'Come and feel my knife's edge across your pretty little throat!'

So saying, she sprang across the floor of the chamber, a long, silver blade like a short sword appearing from the folds of her robes, slashing, quicker than Lonia's eye could follow. Lonia felt the cut across her back through her cloak as she turned, and she fell away, out of range. With a shout like a bird of prey, Syra leapt again, thrusting with her knife-point, but Lonia had gone, swinging away to the right. Her back hurt, though, and she left a trail of blood across the shining floor.

Syra sneered.

'Does it pain you, sow? Can you feel the blood dripping away? Think of the pain you've caused me, taking my blood from me!' she said. Her eyes were glazed with a cold hatred that Lonia had never seen before on a human face.

'Syra, wert thou not so full of hate for all that lives, I could pity thee,' said Lonia.

'Pity? Hate? You don't know what they are —they are both weapons, both have their uses!'

As she spoke, she lunged again, and this time their blades clashed, once, twice, and again. The chamber rang to the sound of steel upon steel. Lonia could not pierce her foe's defence, even though Syra moved awkwardly, it seemed. The older woman was too swift, her arm too strong. Soon Lonia's blood covered the stones of the floor and she almost slipped in it. She tossed aside her bloodied cloak.

'Swimming in your own blood, my brother's lover? I will swim in it, soon!'

Syra lunged again, but this time slipped herself, and slid and caught at her waist, crying out. She did not get up, but lay there panting.

‘What is it?’ Lonia asked, cautiously. Syra began to writhe on the floor.

‘Oh, can you not see, you ignorant worm? I am with child—the child of the gods! Help me!’

She reached out her hand to Lonia. Lonia did not move.

‘You speak to me of Pity?’ hissed Syra. ‘And yet you let me suffer in an agony, while you watch? You are dark of soul, darker than I!’

And she let out a cry, so full of pain, so anguishing, that Lonia almost stepped forward to help.

‘You did not tell me that you were with child!’ she said. ‘How can I fight you, knowing that?’

‘You are heartless, as I thought,’ Syra said, in a quieter voice, ‘heartless and cold, cold as death! Like all of them!’

Lonia stepped to her side and gave her her hand. Syra, groaning, pulled her face close to Lonia’s. A cold breath escaped her, and she said:

‘You talk to me of pity, sow. I speak only of Hate!’

And Lonia felt a needle enter her side, deep and painful. She cried out and twisted away, falling backwards.

Syra got to her feet and leered at her.

‘Ha! I trust that your death will be an agonising one, as has the life that you and your lover made for me! This needle was poisoned. It is a poison made from my blood, so that, in an enchantment, as I live, so shall you die! You shall see the world by its spell through my eyes! Think of it, sister. I shall walk out of this chamber to be the Queen of all that you have known, and the mother of a god! And you shall perish here, writhing in your own blood like the worm-beast that you are, seeing my triumph even as you perish! That is Hate! For I

truly hate you —and your lover, my brother. Perhaps you will live long enough for me to return to tell you of my hate. It is a long story, with many chapters. But now, I must leave you, for your lover, too, is my captive tonight. I wish I could stay and watch you die as well as he. Perhaps you should be put in the same cage, where you can perish together!’

Syra stood over Lonia, who now felt a cold numbness gnawing at her side. Her left arm was limp and cold. She could not get up. Her head burned with a strange fever. Syra seemed unable to leave. She gloated and a wide and inhuman smile played across her face, now twisted into the visage of some demonic image from a forbidden temple. Lonia thought she had never seen something so unnatural on the face of someone she had once known —Syra, it seemed, was lost in a sea of darkness. Perhaps her gods had answered her prayer and after all taken away the last shred of humanity that had dwelt there.

Suddenly, the older girl laughed, and danced around like a puppet, and then set off at a run for the chamber’s door. Lonia felt the room swimming and dissolving. She felt death approaching fast —she thought of Arime, somewhere beneath her in the palace. How she longed to see him again! But it was not to be, it seemed, not unless the spell could be broken, and she could hardly move now. She lay trying to focus on the distant ceiling above, trying to think of the stars —but she saw only the night between them.

And then her mind was full of something else —she saw the world through another’s eyes. In terror, she realised that she was somehow in Syra’s mind, hearing and seeing things as they formed there.

Syra was muttering to herself as she went, muttering strange words of some unknown and perhaps incomprehensible tongue, like one possessed, mixed with her brother's name and the words of death she had prepared for him. How she had plotted for this! How she had enjoyed killing her brother's foolish lover! There had been no way that she could have failed: if she had not used the needle, then she would have lured the girl out onto the battlements, where she would have pushed her to her death, and she would have delighted in watching that young body fall to a grisly end on the rocks below.

These thoughts, and other pictures yet more twisted and evil, ran through Lonia's mind as Syra dashed down the stairs—and the greatest pleasure, Syra thought, was that she felt no longer any remorse. There was no longer any pain in doing evil—the great gods had answered her prayer, it seemed. She was to be their mother; she was no longer human. She need not have feared Sundergost—what could a mere sword do, unwielded, idle, even if it were the Golden Sword of legend which the lorebooks said brought change to the mortal world? Let it be used to slay her brother!

Lonia groaned as the horror of it overcame her. It could not be! Oh, Raendu, she called out to herself, show her mercy—restore to her what she has denied! But her only answer was pain. The vision swept before her again, like a tapestry flapping in the wind.

But Lonia perceived then that, in the brief second in which she had said the words to herself, all was not in fact as Syra desired—deep, deep in her soul, Lonia saw, Syra dwelt still, a prisoner in a dungeon of her own making. And she still

wanted freedom, but was afraid of it. Now that remorse itself was withdrawn from her, Lonía felt that Syra had only one choice left, and she knew it.

She knew that she had to end her own life.

Syra ran wildly, flinging open doors and leaping down stairs. And so she came to the door out onto the battlements, and, unheeding, threw it open, running out into the night air, twirling like an insane dancer. She stepped into the sweeping winds of the storm, slipped in the moving water on the flagstones, and slid with a heavy thud into the low battlement wall, teetering dizzily on the edge of the precipice of carven stone, leaning out into the wind. Then she toppled with a hideous cry into the void.

Her body, trailing its blue robes like the tail of a comet, plummeted through the rain for an eternity, and struck the sharp fingers of waiting rock below with a horrible sound.

Lonía felt that cry and that fall—the shock of it roused her from her dream of death. Blackness enveloped her, and then was suddenly gone. She felt a pain in her side, and a throbbing cut down her back. Her senses slowly returned. In a moment, she could sit up. She crawled to the wall and looked out of the high window onto the rocks far beneath, but she could see nothing. She picked up her sword and cautiously crept out into the corridor.

Lonía scarcely knew what she did for several minutes: the deep cut on her back was still bleeding and shooting pain through her, the stab-wound from the needle still stung her, and she was weak and dizzy with a passing fever. But as she stumbled along she could think of nothing but an image of

Arime, alone and helpless somewhere beneath her, and somehow she managed to stay on her feet.

The passage curved downwards, around the outside of the tower she had climbed in secret darkness through its inner tunnels. In this passage, however, torches burned at regular intervals, fluttering in storm-winds which found their way in through narrow windows that looked out onto the wide world. She stopped and looked out from one of the windows. There seemed to be some commotion below—a horn of alarm was blown, and there was the sound of rushing feet, but she could hear no more above the storm, which was now at its height. Rain lashed the stone, and white lightning flickered over the battlements. She realised that Syra's body had been discovered below: Arime's sister was dead.

She left the window and went on down. The upper corridors were free from sentries—she met no one, and heard no movement. But the High Houses were much larger than Helca's Castle, she thought, and she had no idea of her way, nor where to even begin looking for Arime.

Fortunately, she did not have far to go. She had passed one locked door, but now came to another that was standing open. She heard some dim cry from within. There was no other sound. Raising her sword, she carefully looked around the corner of the doorway.

She could see into a large, dark chamber, lit only by a single torch which cast vast shadows on the sweeping walls. The sound of the storm was here far away. She could make out hanging tapestries, and rich curtains veiling a large object from the flickering firelight. She stepped into the room, and

looked closer. A throne stood there, at the top of three broad steps, partly hidden by the curtain. It was the throne of Tara, she thought, left empty by the Wardens of the Realm, as Arime had explained, until the coming of the High King in Shand over the mountains.

Still nothing moved in the chamber. No one sat in the throne, but Lonia was sure that someone had cried out. She saw another room opening off from the throne room by a little door behind the throne. She stepped forward again, and made her way painfully to the shadows there.

She could see into the smaller room. Brighter light from three torches showed her a strange object, silver-carved and tall, partly veiled by a dark cloth, standing in a corner. Before it stood a little table piled with coloured cloth, beneath which she glimpsed the hilt of Sundergost. Then came the cry again—or rather, she thought, this time a moan of pain. She looked further: it was Arime. He was tied to a chair and was half-awake. No one else was in the room.

She rushed to him.

'Arime!' she whispered. 'Arime! It is I! Lonia!'

As she began to undo his bonds, he sobbed and coughed.

'Is it really you? Where... where are the others? Where is he? The Hooded Man?' he muttered. Lonia cut away the remaining ropes, her own pain forgotten for the moment.

'What has happened?' she said, helping him to stand and rub life back into himself. He opened his eyes and shook himself. 'It is but a little while since you fell drugged before Syra. What has happened since? Where have they gone?'

Arime looked around him.

'I do not know,' he said, recovering himself. 'I fell... my

head spun with some heaviness in the wine, a potion. Then I was looking into the Mirror, the tall, silver Mirror, into the darkness. Baladac was holding me to it, commanding me to look within. I do not know what happened then —I seemed to dream. There was a dark face, a hood, a Hooded Man — and something else, some other face I could not see. It filled me with terror. I screamed, and Baladac laughed. Then he threw me aside and took up something else, wrapped in cloth: Sundergost! He held Sundergost to the Mirror as though it were a window, and someone beyond the window wished to see it. Then he lay the Sword aside and they bound me and held fire close to my face —three of them, I think. But then... I am not certain. I thought I heard a cry, a horrible cry, as of someone dying. I thought perhaps I myself had cried out, unknowingly. Then Baladac and the others rushed out. That was only moments ago.'

Lonia steadied him as he swooned again, but he kept his feet. Then he spied Sundergost lying on the table across the room. He staggered to it and lifted it in its scabbard. Then he unsheathed it, and it shone as before, golden in the firelight. New strength seemed to return to him as he held it, and he stood tall again —but Lonía collapsed onto the floor.

'Lonia!' he cried, running to her. 'You have been bleeding! What has happened to you while I have been captive?'

'I... I fought Syra,' moaned Lonía, trying to raise herself. Arime helped her into the chair and began to bind her wounds, tearing his cloak into strips. 'She stabbed me with poison. She said it was enchanted —that as she lived, so would the poison work in me, and I would die. Everything went dark —but then I awoke, and the poison had gone from

me. I am not sure what happened —but the passages are empty around us, as though some great turmoil has taken place and summoned everyone away.’ She said nothing yet of what she had seen through Syra’s eyes.

‘Not for long, I fear,’ said Arime. ‘They will soon return to continue their tormenting of me. Let us see if we can flee! How are you now?’

Lonia sat up.

‘I am weak, but the bleeding has ceased. But Arime I am so tired! When did we last sleep? And what evils have we found around us here? Syra —married? And with child?’

‘With child?’ Arime said, and Lonía realised that Syra had told her that, but that Arime had already been taken away when she had spoken. He looked blankly at Lonía for a moment. She nodded.

‘Though she used it as a ploy in our fight, I am certain it was true,’ Lonía said.

‘Then we are too late,’ Arime said.

‘Nay, Arime, something is awry. If Syra were well, the poison in me would by now have killed me. Something is wrong —either she lied about the poison, or all is not as she would wish. I had a vision that she had perished.’

‘That cry of death that I heard,’ Arime said, not fully heeding Lonía’s words, ‘I wonder whose it was?’

The truth, or the possibility of it, then began to dawn in his mind.

Lonia stood and gripped his hand. It was cold.

‘Come,’ she said. ‘We must be gone from this place.’

She made to walk out of the room, but saw the shrouded Mirror standing there.

‘Arime, was this the thing that Baladac showed you?’ she said.

‘Yes! Do not touch the evil thing! It is some foul sorcery of the Dark Circle, that I doubt not, and twice now it has shown me great evil, as though it reveals to the eye that which is most feared in the heart.’

But it was too late. Lonia had touched the shroud and it had fallen to the floor. The Mirror stood revealed, seven feet tall, gilded with silver, its smooth polished face swimming with firelit shadows. She saw the room behind her, saw the torches on the walls, saw the chair she had freed Arime from, saw Arime himself standing there—but all was altered: the walls were askew, tilted and strange; the firelight was dimmed and smoky; the chair was dark and distant. It was as though the Mirror was somehow twisted, darkened. And Arime was a small, wizened figure, weak and whimpering like a wounded boy—she felt repelled by his image. The only thing to shine bright and clear in the Mirror was the Sword he held. For a brief moment, she hated that sword, shining so brightly, and she thought how unworthy the boy was to hold it. This whole vision had lasted for no more than an instant of time: then she forgot it all, for she saw herself.

She stood before the Mirror dressed in a black bride’s dress, her flesh pale, and the dress fell away from her as though she had mouldered long beneath the earth. Her face was pale, almost white. Her eyes looked back at her—and she gasped with shock, for they were full of hate and lust, and deep, untapped wells of envy. She stepped back from the face of the Mirror. But she could not remove her gaze from it. The one thing that held her, she thought, was her own beauty

—for though the dress was hideous, and her skin reeked of death, there was no doubting the overwhelming, glowing beauty which shone through it all —but it was a cold, perverse splendour, a twisted beauty of lust rather than love. It held her in a spell.

Arime threw the cloth over the Mirror and Lonía cried out as though struck, and fell back.

‘It is an evil thing!’ he shouted, catching her. ‘A Twisted Mirror! Either it shows us the hidden truth, or it lies like the accursed evil wizards who must have made it! One day it must be broken —but not yet. Let us go!’

Lonía staggered out of the chamber behind him, covering her eyes. Her wounds still hurt, but she felt stronger now that she was at his side. New energy had come to him —he was as eager and fiery as he had been in the tunnel, but a greater weightiness was about him now. Again, she thought, he seemed more like a young king, and less like a boy. The image of the twisted, whimpering youth she had seen in the Mirror quickly faded.

As they stepped out into the Throne Room, though, she heard footsteps beyond. Someone was coming.

Baladac climbed alone the lonely stairs that curved up and up into the topmost tower of the Houses, and with each step both his fury and his fear grew. Syra, his bride, was dead. He had seen what remained of her body on the rocks below. That, in itself, was no matter —he had no love for her, nor any woman alive, and she had hated him, he knew that—but what did it mean? And what vengeance would his god take upon him? For he knew that her child had been devised

to be the God Incarnate, for which they had long planned and schemed: High King of Shand and Tara, Emperor of Turgal, Ruler of the Gods themselves. He, Baladac, was to have been the father of this. But it lay shattered in the ruins of her flesh below. Who had done this deed? He shivered as he thought of the Golden Sword and how she had told him its coming would change the world of men.

Brimming over with a dark anger and a fear which hung like a cloud about him, he came to the Chamber of the Throne of Tara, where the seat prepared for the long-gone High King from the west of the mountains sat in the shadows. Often he had come there alone to brood on his own evil, to plot and to weave yet more elaborate patterns of deceit amongst the threads of his life. It was soothing and ironic to sit on that forbidden seat as he did so, and to ponder on these things in defiance of the supposed glory and honour of those ancient rulers whose throne it rightfully was. For Baladac's whole life was defiance, from the moment when he had spat at his father as a child: he was born a Usurper—his mother had been killed by his birth—and he served the Usurping God, Gon-runin the Great.

Now in that god's name he would search the whole edifice of archaic stone for Syra's killer—for killer he was certain there must be. And he would burn and rend them before an evil altar to appease Gon-runin. He would begin with this white-skinned youth, this supposed true heir to the Throne, his dead wife's brother, son of the accursed Ryna. And when his Turgalin warriors, his Wildweard troops, arrived from the sea, as they would soon, he would burn and rend Tara itself in vengeance.

With these dark and cold thoughts he drew back the tall curtain which hid the unused throne from the eyes of the court. He moved to sit on it.

'Who is it that dares to approach the High Throne of Tara?' said a voice in the shadows of the seat. There, Baladac saw, sat a man, and across his lap shone a sword, naked and golden: the Sword Sundergost.

THE HOODED MAN

Shadows grow longer as light nears the heart of darkness.

-Rondarian proverb

Baladac fell back down the steps, so amazed that he did not even draw his own sword. Lonia watched from the shadows, her own blade ready should any sentry enter behind him.

‘Who art thou?’ cried Baladac in a loud voice.

Arime stood. He seemed tall, and strong, and steady, and the Golden Sword shone in his hand.

‘The rightful King, sitting on his rightful throne,’ he said in a great and calm voice. ‘What is thy business before me, usurper of kingdoms?’

Baladac drew his sword hastily then.

‘My business is to hack thee to pieces and feed thee to my god, thou accursed offspring of Tara,’ he spat.

‘Thy god is darkness,’ said Arime striding down the steps before the throne, sword ready, ‘and mayhap he would not stomach me so lightly. Thou wouldst do well to make thy peace with him, Baladac, before thou perish.’

Baladac was backing away. Though he was a foot taller than Arime, and his scars told of countless battles, his hard flesh of many campaigns in the wild and in distant Turgal, he quailed before the young form of the tall king before him.

The Turgalin prince brought up his sword, though, as he neared the door of the chamber.

'If thou wish to fight me, boy,' he said, pausing, 'thou shalt have such a contest as has never been seen in these halls. And it shall end with thy blood staining thine own floors, just as thy sister's stains the ground before the walls below.'

Arime stopped then and faltered.

'My sister?' he said. Baladac grinned, his courage returning to him as he spun his web.

'Thy sister, my beloved wife, lies dead in many pieces outside. Come, and I will show thee,' said Baladac, 'and we can spit on her remains together, for like as not thou loved her as little as I!'

Arime swung his first stroke in rage then, and it went wide as Baladac jumped beyond the door and ran up the stairs. Arime followed him. The sound of the thunder and rain echoed in the passage as he pursued his quarry upwards. Lonia followed.

Baladac ran on, past the door to Syra's chamber through which they had come, on up into the topmost parts of the great tower. As he reached the door to a chamber there he picked a torch from its bracket in the wall and flung it down at Arime, who stepped aside as the flaming brand scorched past him. The torch fell harmlessly at Lonia's feet, but Baladac had vanished into the room at the top, and silence fell, but for the echo of the thunder and rain.

A silver light spilled out from the door onto the steps of the climbing passage. No shadow moved within. Lonia watched as Arime crept cautiously to the door. Suddenly he leapt to it and could see within, but no one leapt out to meet him. Slowly he went in, and Lonia ran up to follow him.

They were in the Star Chamber, topmost of the great

chambers of the High Houses, where the Wardens and Lords of Tara were wont to come in times of counsel. Here the ceiling was of crystal, so that light poured down from it from the sun in the daytime. Now, all Lonia could see as she looked up was the turmoil of the storm, hiding the stars. There were many shadows in the chamber, and no sign of Baladac. A long table ran through the centre of the room, under the crystal roof.

A knife suddenly flashed through the darkness and glanced from Sundergost as Arime bent —it flew away, bouncing noisily from the table onto the stone floor.

‘I have many weapons, boy,’ said Baladac from the shadows, ‘not least a thousand soldiers below me in the castle alone. Thou canst not hope to escape.’

‘I do not hope for escape,’ said Arime, watching the shadows. ‘I come in retribution.’

Lonia could hear Baladac breathing heavily somewhere in the room, but it was hard to place where. She placed her hand to one ear, tilting it off centre to give her owl’s hearing, and cried out:

‘Arime, to your left!’

Baladac’s great sword, flying like a spear through the air, hurtled towards Arime’s head. He fell forward, swinging Sundergost up, and parried the blade, but before he could recover, Baladac was on him like a cat, heaving backwards with his arms around Arime’s neck to break his back. Arime twisted, digging with his elbow. Baladac groaned, and Arime twisted free briefly —but the larger man was the stronger and his grip held Arime’s tunic as he kicked the prince’s legs out from under him. But then Sundergost was at Baladac’s

throat and he fell back.

‘Pick up thy sword,’ said Arime breathlessly.

Baladac grinned, standing and walking to where his blade had fallen.

‘So,’ he said, also catching his breath, ‘it is to be weighed in such a fashion? What thou in Shand call a fair fight? I call it folly, but I welcome it, brother-in-blood. Your sense of honour is misplaced and sickens me, but I will use it if it means that I can slit thy throat all the sooner!’

So saying he bent and picked up his sword, and in one stroke struck it hard on the marble floor so that sparks arose—and Lonia gasped, for flames sprang along the sharp blade until the weapon burned like a torch in Baladac’s hand.

‘Ah, did thou not know?’ said Baladac, seeing the light of the fire reflect in Arime’s eyes. ‘This is Urbitor, third of the famed Swords of Fire from Turgal—it burns long as it kills. It burns with a fiery passion for death, as I burned when I took thy sister!’

Arime aimed another stroke, but the flame-sword parried it and pushed him back. As he stumbled, Baladac came on, sweeping the blade with great skill so that the darkness of that chamber was cut by many arcs of flame, and Arime needed all his skill and speed to avoid death. Somehow he managed it, and stood breathless with the table between them. Lonia came forward then, but Arime waved her back.

‘So, should thou fail, thy women-folk will offer themselves for slaughter too, eh?’ said Baladac, noticing Lonia for the first time. ‘She will feed the god too, when I have finished with thee! Or perhaps Gon-runin, my master, will devise a greater evil for her?’

As he spoke, Baladac leapt the table and a series of strokes followed which it took all of Arime's strength to parry —the taller man was stronger and more skilled with the sword, Lonía now knew for certain. She gasped as Arime was flung against a further door and it swung open into the storm.

They stumbled out onto a wide, open area before the battlements. Rain swept down, and a cold wind buffeted at them from the north. White flashes struck the mountaintops above them, and thunder rolled around them as they fought, Arime falling backwards before the Turgalin blade, which still flamed in the night sky.

Baladac paused, laughing. The rain hissed against the hot sword in his hands, and slowly the fire went out. He looked down at it.

'Cold steel for death,' he said, and slowly advanced towards Arime.

Arime backed into the battlements. He looked down. Far below them the Houses fell, terrace by terrace, to the first roofs of the city of Alathosa below. Beyond, the bay of the sea was half-hidden by the falling rain. Great crowds were moving below and horns rang; Lonía thought she could hear the noise of many voices and the clatter of hoofs, but the wind caught the sound and tossed it away.

Baladac looked down as well.

'The cattle learn of the death of their mistress, thy sister, fallen from on high to her end on the rocks,' he said. He spat over the wall. 'I am not there to tell my loyal men and the Reaver scum to quell the people's eagerness with blood, but no matter —I have but to finish thee, and then I shall see to the burning of this little realm. My fleet arrives with the

dawn, I am told. Mayhap we shall see it from here as it sails into harbour. Then I will make thee watch as the torches are put to thy city before I sever thy head from thy body, boy!

Arime fell aside as another blow rang on the stone where he had stood. He parried three more blows before he got to his feet. Lonia could see that his sword-arm was weary and that the weariness was quickly spreading over him. Baladac was a ferocious fighter —he ceaselessly pummelled at Arime's defences, wearing him down.

They stood apart now, both regaining breath. The rain poured down on them. Lightning flickered on the golden banner of the prince of Turgal as a grey-gold light grew in the east. Lonia edged towards the battlements and looked down. Many had gathered below, some in armour —she could not tell what was happening.

'Dost thou know what thy sister said of thee, boy?' hissed Baladac. 'She spoke of thee often —especially of the delight she had in tormenting thee. She knew that thou wouldst return, and she looked forward to it. She said thou wouldst come for her; she said the one-eyed man would fail with thee; she knew that she held thee as a young dove in her hand, and that she had but to twist her fingers to wring thy neck! She wanted thee back, Arime —she had many things that thou couldst do for her —glad was she that thou brought Sundergost with thee!'

'No!' shouted Arime, and he surged forward, slashing. Lonia was astonished at the ferocity of his attack — Sundergost glowed golden as it swung through the air in a web of strokes which drove Baladac back to the wall of the battlements and then onto it. But on Arime came, leaping to

the top of the wall himself, his sword never ceasing, forcing Baladac to parry every blow, making him walk backwards precariously on the thin wall of stone. Lightning flickered, and Lonia heard a great cry from below as those who had gathered looked up to see the battle between the princes.

On came Arime, step by step, his face stern but torn by sobs as he fought, Sundergost sweeping back and forth in great arcs, hacking at Baladac's blade until fragments flew from the Turgalin's weapon and sparks re-ignited the oil despite the rain. Golden sword and flaming blade met again and again; back stepped Baladac, jumping from point to point hundreds of feet up as the wind lashed them both. Arime did not stop, his new strength fuelled by a rage that Lonia felt must have been almost limitless within him. She could see that it was Baladac who now grew weak—his arm was faltering, his guard dropping. Then Arime struck deep, and Baladac clutched his side and cried out.

'Gon-rinin curse thee, boy!' he hissed. 'My sword'll feast on thy blood yet!'

He charged then, lunging desperately at Arime, but he almost missed his footing and stopped.

At that moment, the sun rose, and the edge of the storm rode back. Lonia could see the many hundreds of folk who swarmed in the streets below, some of them fighting, it seemed. Of the soldiers she could see, many were frozen watching the contest above them, as if it would determine their fate; beyond them the streets of Alathosa were alive with movement. But then her eye was caught by something else—out at sea, just coming into the bay below, she saw a great fleet of many coloured ships, sailing before a changed

wind and entering harbour with the light. She saw Baladac watch them too —he laughed, forgetting his wound, and pointed with his sword.

‘Behold thy death, boy!’ he cried, standing tall above Arime in the new sunlight. ‘So much for Sundergost’s power to reverse the world’s fortunes! The Great God Gon-runin has not abandoned me! Thy sister was unworthy to be his mother, that was all! Look! Behold the fleet that I have long awaited! Now the burning of Tara shall begin, and all thy folk shall quail before me and before my heirs, and thy name shall never come to the glory thou seekest!’

With Baladac’s words, Lonia’s spirit, stirred by the sweeping arcs of Sundergost, faltered. She had thought perhaps that with Syra’s death a change would come —that Sundergost, released at last into the world of daylight, would indeed bring about a shift in the fortunes of the world at large. Now, looking down on the fleet that sailed into the harbour she thought what a false dream that was. She wept. Then she looked again at Arime.

Arime peered out across the vast space before the harbour, and Lonia saw his face grow pale and ashen, and Sundergost faltered in his hand —but then the remnant of the storm which had passed over the face of the sun was gone, and a warm light fell on the Golden Sword and on his face, and Lonia wondered that he could seem so beautiful to her, even in his uttermost defeat, for his face seemed to grow suddenly lighter, and he smiled. And he turned to Baladac, and said:

‘Look again, thou Usurper of Thrones, and see the true reward of thy labours! For Sundergost is come again, and the dawn belongs to Raendu, not thy spawn of darkness!’

And Lonia looked, as Baladac did, across and down to the harbour again —and she saw that the first ships were now almost at the quay. And the first of them was unfurling a great banner before the breeze on which it ran: a banner of white, shot through with ebony and gold. She knew from the books of heraldry that she had seen that this was the banner of Turgal —not of its prince, but of its Emperor. And at its centre she could make out the letter signifying 'G', and she knew that Galatar had come from beyond hope, and at the very last moment.

Then Baladac, she saw, saw the banner too, and recognised the letter and what it portended, and he knew that at last his father Ranatar had died, and that the crown of Turgal had passed to his elder brother —and the blood drained from him, and was replaced by a cold fire. He stared for a long while then looked up into the clearing heavens and spat. Syra was dead; his dreams were put out; his god, it seemed, had abandoned him after all.

Sundergost had come again.

'He reached our father before the end then,' he muttered. 'So be it,' he added, and he fell on Arime with the new-found strength of despair.

Blow after blow fell between them, and they leapt up to and down from the stone as they went —but Lonia saw that they were both now more equal in the fight, for Arime had new confidence, whereas Baladac, wearied and disenchanted, fought in desperation. But both were bloodied and cut, as many swings and thrusts of each others' blades hacked and slashed at their weary bodies, and soon the rain-washed stone was red with both their bloods.

In the end, Sundergost turned Urbitor aside, and with a flourish it flew from his grip and vanished over the battlements to fall with a clatter in a courtyard far below. Then Arime brought the point of Sundergost to his enemy's throat.

Baladac gathered his breath:

'Be done with thy taunts,' he said. 'I am not ashamed to be slain by the Sword that slew my god. I go to join him in the festering fire, there to prepare the flames under thy grave.'

But Arime lowered Sundergost, and said:

'As thou hast never shown mercy, thou dost not deserve it. But Raendu has shown it to me, and I will not begrudge it.'

Then Lonia came forth and bound Baladac with ropes, and bound Arime's wounds as best she could —and there they waited, as the warming sun rose in the sky.

Lonia heard a growing clamour from below the walls. She was weary beyond imagining, she thought, and her own wounds pained her, but the cries had an urgency to them that would not be denied. It was as though the whole city had risen up with the dawn.

Arime went to the edge of the battlements with her and looked down: thousands of people, Tarans it seemed, had gathered in the courtyards and wide spaces beneath the walls. Seeing Arime standing there in the sunlight, a great shout went up from them, and many colours were raised. It was a shout of joy.

Arime raised the Sword Sundergost, and the sun glinted from its golden blade, and the shout continued. But Lonia looked at his face, and it was stern and not joyful. His eyes were hard, and dark, full of an unspoken sorrow, and he bled

from many cuts. She touched his arm and he turned to her and lowered the Sword.

‘This has been a strange and hard homecoming,’ he said quietly. She nodded, and knew that he was thinking not of his wounds nor the fight, but of Syra and his loss.

As the day drew on, they did not move from the battlements, hungry and tired though they were. A great turmoil had started in the city, and many of those who had gathered under the walls marched or rode off. Fires sprang up here and there, and the glint of sword and armour could be seen in the streets. After an hour or two, though, soldiers in the livery of Turgal’s Emperor found the Star Chamber and came out through the door to them. They moved cautiously and had swords raised, and looked with astonishment on the sullen and bound form of Baladac—but on finding Arime they put up their weapons and greeted him with friendly words.

‘Hail, Prince of Tara,’ said their captain, bowing. ‘The tale of thy deeds precedes thee in the city. They say thou fought with this Usurper single-handedly, and that thou bear a mighty sword, even the Golden Blade of legend. These things, which we marvelled at, I now see might be true. I am Ravathar, Captain of the High Guard of his Imperial Majesty Galatar III of Turgal, who now climbs through thy city, liberated from the enemy, to speak with thee.’

‘Verily, Ravathar,’ said Arime, ‘I welcome thee and thine Emperor with a glad heart, for thy coming was the timeliest in the annals of war. But is Alathosa truly free from the enemy already?’

‘But for a few remaining rebels, sire,’ said Ravathar, ‘for

the Reavers, seeing the Emperor arriving in force, for the most part fled—and those Turgalin who served Baladac, the Emperor has bid throw down their arms and sue for pardon.’

‘Then I shall meet thine Emperor in due course, in the Throne Room of the High Houses,’ said Arime, and he stepped forward as he spoke, but he collapsed, and he and Lonía were taken to bed-chambers and eased with rest and food.

Later that day, when the sun which had risen on victory was setting in a red blaze over the peaks of the Mountains of Morning, Lonía awoke in a warm chamber full of the twilight and glowing firelight from a large hearth. She had been washed and her wounds bound properly, and the great stiffness and weariness had eased. She sat up, and looked about her.

From her window she could look out at the red range of mountains to the west, and she thought of Restonia, far away, and what might be happening there. Did this victory in Tara now mean that Shand could be freed? Possibly—for if the Reavers were scattered and the Turgalins now allies rather than deadly enemies, Baladac’s remaining forces in Shand could be surrounded. But she feared that all was not over yet—apart from the likelihood of more fighting, she wondered where Sundergost would yet lead them. Plucking it from its burial place had indeed set in motion more than even the movements of the earth beneath: the world was changing.

She sighed. It seemed so long since she had left Restonia: and for all that time she felt as though she had been running

either from or toward great danger. And what of Arime? Would this victory now release him from his dark mood, and give him the capacity for joy again?

She got up, moving carefully to avoid re-opening any wounds, and was about to seek for him when the door opened and a sentry, dressed richly in the red, gold and white of Turgal, entered, followed by two others who took up positions on either side of the door. Then a great, dark man entered, taller and broader than Baladac, his hair long, black and braided, but streaked with grey, dressed in shining gold embroidered with white. As he saw her awake and risen, he bowed to her. He looked up from his bow and she gasped—his right eye was almost closed by a deep and long scar, which at first looked new but after a moment, she realised, was years old. He looked on her and smiled.

‘Greetings, Lady of Restonia,’ he said in a great voice in the High Tongue, ‘I am Galatar of Turgal.’

She bowed, but it pained her and she sank back onto the bed.

‘Take rest for thine own sake, my lady,’ said Galatar, ‘I can return at another hour if you wish.’

‘No, stay, please,’ she said. ‘Perhaps thou can tell me of my prince, Arime?’

Galatar nodded, and dismissed his sentries so that they were alone.

‘He is well in body—his wounds have been tended—but he has told me of thy great quest through fire and water and under earth, and he has shown me the Golden Sword. It seems to me that the coming of Sundergost has changed the world indeed, for with it came a new dawn to Tara, and an

end to long evils. These are matters of high legend, which it will take many minstrels of my realm to capture. Thou will become mighty in song, my lady!’

‘If still weak in the world under the sun and stars,’ said Lonía, smiling, and dropping out of the High Tongue as her weariness swept over her again. ‘But tell me then of the events beyond the castle. What has happened, and how did you come to sail to Tara at so fortunate an hour?’

As she spoke, tired as she was, she wondered that she could do so so calmly, for she remembered that this was none other than Galatar whom Ryna had brought to Helca’s Castle long ago, Galatar of the Crimson Company, Galatar who was now Emperor of a realm vaster than her homeland. But he was not as daunting in manner as his appearance, she began to see —though tall and strong, he was gentle; though stern of face he was kind in word and deed. He was all those things that Baladac, his younger brother, had not been. Here was a true leader of men, who commanded through love and for service, not by fear or cruelty, she thought.

He told her of his long sojourn in the wilderness, roaming the fringes of Turgal for years with a growing band of rebels, loyal to the true Turgal and sworn enemies of Baladac; he told of his eventual coming to the great Turgalin city of Thorondimar-Maslak, the Cracked Thorn.

‘There I came in disguise smuggled by friends even into the heart of the royal palace, for I knew that my father was dying —and there is little that can forestall a son’s love of his father, even though they be bitter enemies in the outward world,’ Galatar went on. ‘Long and hard had been that road to his side! For when I left the lands of the west, Ryna, the

Mistress of Tara, had not yet sailed to the Dark Isles nor wrested Sterreth from the idol of Gon-runin there; neither you nor Arime had yet been born; and Baladac my brother reigned as Regent in the land of my home, and ranged far and wide in the world, doing great cruelties in my father's name.

'But then at last I stood before Ranatar, my father, on his bed of death, and the greatest contest of my life was fought there—not with sword, nor bow, nor with my mortal hands, but in the darkness of our minds.'

Galatar paused, and Lonia saw him tremble with the memory.

'Few have walked the paths that lead beyond despair,' he said at last. 'Yet that is where I had to go with him—deep into his soul, where I saw not only the emptiness that held sway there, but the false gods that he had set up to worship in that emptiness. One by one, while the outer world waited, and the lords and warriors of Turgal, all the great of the Empire, gathered about us in the room and stood and watched, I shattered those idols in his mind, gripping his hand as he verged on death. It would not have been possible, Lonia, not even had I all the strength and power of a Herald of the Gods, to break those false things had he not been there with me, helping me: for my father, waking to the errors he had made, walked slowly at my side, undoing the darkness.'

'Long we laboured, but in the end he was saved. He died from the world of mortal flesh, but his spirit was free: and with his last words he rejected Gon-runin and proclaimed me the true heir of Turgal before all those nobles who had gathered there. They bowed before me then and sued for

pardon for their evil service to Baladac, and I set them to work healing harms and gathering the mighty host with which my brother had intended to replenish his armies in Shand: for now I would take it over the sea to liberate the lands it had been called together to crush.

‘For the first charge of an Emperor, I deemed, was undoing the burden of all the evil deeds done in his name — these could not be denied, lest a new shadow grow in the realm. And so I was forced to sail to remedy my brother’s actions, and to rescue those who had shown me friendship and given me succour when I wandered alone in the wild, far from home or friend. Ryna would have been glad to see that fleet sail into Alathosa —but I feared that I would not see her again when I left Tara so long ago, and I think she knew it.’

‘But you also shall become immortal in song, Galatar,’ said Lonia, ‘for my mind is now full of deeds of legend in your story no less than those you ascribe to me.’

‘Maybe so,’ said Galatar, smiling, ‘but before any song can be written the deed must be fully done. Shand remains to be freed —and though now bereft of their leader, many thousands of the enemy still roam its fields and must be subdued ere they are cast out.’

‘Are plans made for this?’ asked Lonia.

‘I have talked with your prince, and preparations are being made for war, my lady,’ said the Emperor —and then he paced slowly across the room. The fire burned low in the hearth, but the spring night was warm. Stars burned in the sky above the black edge of the mountains through the window.

‘What is it, Galatar?’ said Lonia, watching as the man

stroked his black beard thoughtfully.

He paused, then spoke his mind:

‘My lady, I said that your prince was well-healing in body, and this is so —indeed, his youth heals him quickly, and he will be up and riding within days— but the wounds he gained from sword and fire and long journeying were not his only wounds I deem. Some great sorrow or shadow haunts him. Can you tell me aught of this?’

Lonia looked down into her hands on the coverlet where they lay. She told Galatar then of the loss of Tarazion beneath the earth, and of the sudden and terrible death of Syra. She spoke quietly, remembering the details to herself as she spoke.

‘It is her death that he ponders on, I think,’ she went on, ‘and the earlier deaths, which, as a stream grows by being fed by a higher lake, feed the later losses. You knew his mother: he did not. To Arime it seems as though the world takes away those he loves. He does not know whether it is some evil god, or the shadow of his own heart, I think —but he seems fated never to know peace, and always to be, as he sees it, alone. The one-eyed man Tarazion perished, as far as we can see, on the road under the world —and Syra died unredeemed, betraying him.’

‘And yet her death, I know, was the spark which spread through the city before any fire of the enemy, raising the people of Tara to hope with the dawn,’ said Galatar, thinking. ‘With her evil gone, they felt the tide had turned, and they were right. Must he torment himself so?’

‘Blood-bonds and unanswered love can blind the eyes of the strongest, and even the mightiest can feel alone, can they

not?’ said Lonia.

Galatar nodded, smiling grimly.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘do I not know it? I should not need to be reminded of that by one so young —for was not my father thus led blindly into the greater darkness? And my brother is my enemy. It is hard to hate one who is close, or to feel sure of love in anyone when the world seems black, and that leads to a loneliness of the spirit. But what then is the answer? He must come out from this shadow if he is to be crowned High King of all the west —or his crowning will seem not like the emerging of the sun from a long winter, but its hiding behind new clouds. Here is a riddle that the wise may puzzle over: our victory has not yet brought him joy, nor has Sundergost, it seems, brought him hope.’

‘Maybe because it is not yet a full victory,’ said Lonia. ‘No, I do not mean a victory of arms only. Tarazion thought he knew the answer. He kept on saying that there was a road to be walked. He ended up walking it alone, perhaps to his death. It is clear there is still some undone thing that waits for Arime —and Sundergost.’

‘These matters are high even for us,’ Galatar said, ‘kings and queens though we may be. Let us see him now, and maybe we shall see a course we can take.’

Galatar helped Lonia walk down the short passage outside her room to where Arime lay asleep in his own bed. His face did seem troubled indeed, Lonia thought, and still Sundergost was kept nearby. He half-stirred as they entered, and then, as the fire crackled quietly in the hearth behind them, he slowly woke.

He smiled at Lonia for a long while, and she went to him

and held his hand.

‘We have seen much of the world of late, thou and I,’ he said quietly, and she gripped his hand tighter and smiled back.

Then he and Galatar fell to discussing the preparations for the re-conquest of Tara and the march over the mountains.

‘One third of our forces only, then,’ said Galatar, ‘must be left for the liberating of this land and its protection from the north. All others, Turgalin and Taran alike, could march at once through the Pass of the South, sweep through the Middle Lands to join with the exiled armies in Rondar, and then fight north to the heart of your kingdom in early summer. The enemy may not resist for long—they are far from home and without guidance, and many of their host will come over to me when they see that I have returned to my rightful place—but we must prepare as great a force as we may, lest the war draw on. Nevertheless, by Midsummer’s Day you could be crowned High King at Stonehammer’s Seat.’

Arime’s face clouded as he spoke.

‘I do not yet wish to be crowned,’ he said quietly, ‘even though the realm be fully freed. It is not yet time.’

Galatar paused, glancing at Lonia.

‘What then would remain to be done?’ he said at last. ‘For with Baladac captured and our prisoner, and his hosts disarmed, the Dark Isles would be defeated. A new age would dawn for all our lands.’

‘No!’ said Arime, grimly. ‘No, you do not understand. You should know this, Galatar, you of all people—did you not know my mother? Was not her folly that she believed the

Dark Isles subdued, their power gone, their leaders afraid? Was this not the moment of their greatest triumph, when she deemed it right to take from them Sterreth and use its sorcery for Tara? Her land then seemed at peace also, and her enemies conquered. And yet when she placed that Jewel upon her brow they gained their greatest captive and perverted the course of the line of the High Kings: Tara was cut off from the world, and Shand and the other realms were abandoned to their fate, descending into war and fear. We must not choose the same road as she, however it may seem.'

Galatar stood and slowly walked to the fire.

'I see your thought, Arime,' he said. 'After the freeing of Shand, then, we must unite to throw down the Dark Isles once and for all, breaking their evil temples along with their mightiest fortresses. They must not be permitted to rise again.'

Arime passed a hand across his face.

'Your words are welcome, friend,' he said after a moment, 'but I am now not certain if that is what I meant. Indeed, the thought of breaking the evil that lies over the sea comes nearer the mark than any other counsel I have yet heard — but I wonder if we are not overlooking some deeper strategem?'

Galatar turned and waited for him to go on.

'Ryna my mother walked freely into their innermost sanctum and took their most precious thing, and all about there was little that resisted her, and she commanded man and beast with the power of the Jewel, and so escaped. Though you warned her against the deed, this did not seem strange to many at that time: that the great Morndred, the

Dark Circle whose very name makes the wise quail, let this come to pass and so abandoned their heart to their enemy. We know now that this was a deception, a trick by which they snared Ryna to their will.'

'What are you saying, Arime?' asked Lonia. She could see him struggling to capture some elusive thought, fighting with himself to deny doubt within and have the words spoken.

'I do not know,' he murmured, 'I do not know. All I know is that my heart runs cold when I think of that place, that great Firevault beneath the world, and I cannot accept the Crown of the Four Kingdoms while that fear lives on in me. Mayhap you are right, and we can assault their Citadel atop Wormstone the Great, by force of arms alone, and bring it down. But Aradu the dark father of Gon-rinin was not at the last defeated by arms, nor did the slaying of the Enchantress and Gon-rinin her consort end all evil in the world. The darkness cannot be crushed or removed by force of arms, as the one-eyed man said. There must be something else. I fear that the Morndred is stronger in other things than swords. Surely the vast armies of Turgal, and the great fleets of the Reavers, are but tools in their dark hands? Are there not other worlds to conquer than the world under the sun and moon? Tarazion told me that at the end of the road was a great darkness into which even he could not see. In that darkness, he said, was something living, something greater than any other power he had known, and its power fed the fires of evil, enabling the Dark Isles to reach out into the lands of men and clutch their wills. A shadow lies over the world—I do not yet know its source.'

There was a long silence in the room. The fire had burned down to glowing embers. Galatar then spoke:

‘Then you are saying that the conquest of all our kingdoms, Shand, Tara, the Middle Lands and Turgal, are but a part of some larger war, and that the shadow of evil behind the armies of the enemy cannot be defeated by arms alone?’

‘Aye,’ said Arime, still struggling to put his thought into words. ‘Aye. Not a larger war in the way we measure largeness, just as the measure of arms against them is no true measure, for darkness drops its swords as soon as raises them if by either action it accomplishes a more evil end. My mother’s tale showed this. The Morndred gave up what we would have accounted their greatest treasure, perhaps, so that they might capture their greatest prize —and so they would have captured her truly, had not she defied them at the end, and been redeemed.’

‘What then do they seek?’ asked Lonia. To her it had grown cold in the room and a chill air came in through the window now as the stars wheeled round to the later night.

‘I do not know,’ said Arime again, still staring into the embers of the fire, his eyes looking beyond the room to some far away place, ‘I do not know —but it is not necessarily our kingdoms under the light of Raendu’s Star, the sun.’

‘Are you saying then that all our trials, our wars, our defences, are ill-marked?’ said Galatar.

‘No, no, not at all, Galatar,’ Arime said, turning to him. ‘Do you not see? Conquest of lands, slaughter and slavery, the torment of the world —these things are a delight to the enemy, indeed: but they are only the sign of their greater success, their greater evil, their deeper conquest. For every

thousand innocent slain, they measure a hundred swayed to evil, and perhaps a handful truly dark of heart. For every realm enslaved they welcome its king into their dark bosom. For every act of evil done they count the perpetrator as their prize. We do not fight against rival kings, I think, hungry for land and riches, as their servants the Reavers do —no, their aim is higher and deeper than that. They want our souls. We do not fight them with swords, riding out to meet them on horseback —we fight them at night, alone, in the solitude of our hearts, when we are surrounded by doubt and fear. It is then that we are assailed. The shadow of which the one-eyed man spoke is long and reaches far, as I have said —and no man can come to the High Throne, I fear, except through that shadow.'

Lonia shivered. Somewhere out beyond the castle there was a distant cry, perhaps a wolf in the mountains or a night-bird. She wanted to sleep, to put aside Arime's words. He spoke as one bewitched, she thought, but she could not deny his meaning. She too had felt the inner darkness and dread, and she remembered the Mirror and the terrible image of herself that she had seen there —and she thought with a chill that went over her like a wind of ice that the most terrible thing about that image had been that it was her, some deep part of her, made real and visible from beyond the confines of her thought. Where indeed was the source of the shadow: in the Dark Isles, or in her own heart?

Galatar was speaking:

'These are words for daylight, and for wiser minds than mine. You are both still weary from your long ordeals, and I must let you rest. It will be some days before all is made

ready. Will you ride at the head of the gathered host of Tarans, Arime?’

Arime nodded, returning his gaze to within the room.

‘I am still their true Warden, after Syra, if nothing else,’ he said. ‘And wherever my road leads, it leads first back to Shand, I think. Fear not, Galatar, I see you think me part-enchanted! It is not so. Indeed, my eyes are growing clearer now for having spoken so openly to you both. I can see at least where I must go for now. I will ride with you!’

Galatar nodded and bowed, and Lonia kissed Arime’s brow and they left him. But his words haunted Lonia, and she wondered what road she would need to take if she were to one day be his queen.

Lonias and Arime spent many days recovering and resting in the High Houses, but their wounds and weariness were quickly healed. There was much to put in order.

The first thing Arime did when he was able to walk again was visit the body of his sister where it had been recovered from the rocks and laid under a blue mantle. And when he looked on it, Lonia thought, did he see in its mangled shape the distortion of the spirit there, as she had seen it through Syra’s evil magic? He went pale, and looked away, and did not speak of it again.

Then both of them were compelled by Galatar to don robes of state and greet the Lords of Tara, freed from bondage, and Arime re-instated them to their lands and posts, and accepted their allegiance —and they were very glad of his return, coming as he did bearing the legendary Golden Sword and allied with the Turgalin Emperor from

over the sea.

Last of those brought before Arime was Barragath, and they greeted each other as friends, and embraced.

'Long have I waited for this day,' said Barragath, 'and well I know how proud your mother would have been. Here, then, is the Sword itself, of which you dreamed! In this, all that Ryna hoped to accomplish comes to pass.'

'Not all,' said Arime, 'but it is long for me too, though it is less than two years since I rode over the hills to Restonia with you, my friend. Aye, my dream of the Sword comes true indeed! I wonder what my waking will bring?'

As the Lord Yarin had died in the winter, fighting in faraway Shand—and he was greatly mourned and missed—Arime made Barragath the Earl Marshal of Tara, and placed into his hands the care of those armies which were to remain in Tara to drive out the remaining enemy and to protect the realm.

This task was already underway, and the last host of Reavers had carved their way bloodily into a northern stronghold in the mountains, where the Taran host held them in siege. Of the rest, only groups of bandits or lone outlaws were left. Of the Turgalins who had served Baladac, Galatar pardoned the great majority and set them to work repairing the damage they had done. Those who would not be pardoned he had placed on board a ship of their own, without weapons, and had it towed to the northern islands, where they were left to make their own lives amid the treeless, frozen wastes.

Baladac he would not pardon either, for the usurper also resisted any mercy and remained dark and arrogant.

Therefore Galatar placed him in a cage and sent him under guard back to Turgal, there to meet the justice of his own people, and great was his anger and humiliation on being carted caged through the streets of Alathosa to the quays where a ship awaited. Then Galatar turned from the quay and spoke to Lonia and Arime:

‘I said to Ryna that my road to Baladac would be longer and harder than I had once thought. I had not even then guessed how long. But on coming to him I find the main battle already fought —Baladac is but a fallen warrior in the longer, deeper war, the war of souls of which you spoke. Would that I had reached him sooner.’

He turned away then and spoke no more of his brother.

Time went by —and then Lonia knew that the time had come for them to leave Tara and journey over the mountains towards her home. She looked for Arime early that summer morning, but she could not find him in his own room nor the Throne Room, nor was he in the Star Chamber. On her way down the stairs again she passed by the Throne Room again, though, and noticed the door to the other, smaller room behind the throne was open. She went in.

Arime stood before the unshrouded Mirror, unmoving.

‘Arime?’ she said quietly. He did not turn, but heard her, and beckoned her near.

‘Come!’ he said, a strange fear in his voice. ‘Come! Do you not see him? Can you not see the Hooded Man?’

Lonias looked over his shoulder and into the Mirror. Its glass swirled with twisted shadows, she thought, but she saw Arime looking out at her clearly enough.

‘He is so cold, and dark —and I must not fear him! And

yet I do, Lonia, I do!' said Arime, and a sob arose in him as he peered into the glass.

'This is an evil thing, Arime, a device by which the enemy uses the great power he draws from his dark wells to catch and hold the souls of the great,' she said, touching his arm. 'Come away from it! It shows us darker things than we should look upon. Baladac used it to speak to his gods—did he not show you to them through it? And Sundergost?'

Arime took his eyes from it then and looked at her. He breathed deeply, as though gasping for air, then paused, gripping her hand.

'Yes, you are right,' he said, and grasped the hilt of the Golden Sword at his side. 'You see truly—whereas I am tired of being misled! Everything I have seen in this glass from the start has been a lie or a trick, feeding either fear or hatred. This is the window to the dark gods then, or at least to their servants here in Tara. Well, I refuse them, and reject their lordship, as did my mother at the end! Let them look upon that which slew them and wounded their plans to the core!'

And he drew Sundergost from its blue and crimson scabbard and held it before him. It glimmered with a soft golden light in the Mirror. Lonia thought she saw shadows swirling more swiftly there, but it might, she thought, have been simply the light shifting in the twisted glass as she shifted her own footing.

Arime stood there for a moment, still peering into the glass, but then he drew himself up, and spoke in a strong voice.

'I defy you, do you hear me? I defy you as my mother did. You shall neither have me nor mine. And your window on

this world shall be closed!

And Lonía leapt backwards as he swung Sundergost in a mighty arc and smashed the Mirror into a thousand fragments. They scattered like tiny stars in the sky, and a sudden silver fire sprang up, lighting the whole chamber for a brief instant, and was gone. Broken glass littered the floor. Arime re-sheathed Sundergost and, after a silent moment, strode from the room.

Lonía looked down at the pieces of glass. A large one caught her eye, reflecting it—or was it her eye? Someone or something looked back at her through the fragment. She trembled, and crushed the fragment under her foot, imagining as she did a distant cry of impotent rage, passing by on a breeze. Thus, she thought, was the Dark Circle's eye into the west put out; she wondered what other senses and limbs the enemy would now use.

Lonía then rode forth with the host led by Galatar and Arime for the rescue of the west, and she came through the great Pass of the South, between the Mountains of Morning and the Guardian Mountains, and into the lands about Tarrabelner—and there the army freed Prundria and other lands from the grip of the enemy. For the Reavers fled before them into the mountains or the moors, and the Turgalins, seeing their new Emperor, largely surrendered—but many fought on, and the war of the west was not yet won, and the winter of that year was long and hard.

But as it wore on Arime and Galatar met with Raegarð of Valadria and Colomain of Rondar and the Lords of the South Vale, and Kirraen the Crown Prince of Miria, son of Irraen

who had perished before the Shandhall with Yarin, defending the gate. And they met King Helca, as he lay abed from a wound received in a great sortie made beyond Rondar's borders, and he looked on both Arime and Lonia with joyful eyes.

'A man's dreams can still come true then,' he said to them as they stood together before him, and saw the Sword Sundergost laid out before him. 'I knew when you first came to us Arime that you were your mother's son. It makes my heart glad to see you two together, though I should rebuke you both for riding from my castle into the darkness without leave. Now that it comes to it, I am too full of joy.'

'Noble Helca,' said Arime, bowing, 'glad I am that we could come in time for you to have that joy.'

There Helca gave blessing to the marriage of his daughter, but Arime would not speak of this to her when they had left the king.

'What is it?' she said, following him down the long passage of the healing-house in Rondar where Helca lay. 'Why dost thou cast such a shadow over these matters?'

He stopped and looked deeply into her eyes.

'Think not that it is due to any lack of love,' he said, replying in the High Tongue that she had used. 'Rather, too much do I love thee, and for this reason alone do I delay. The road has yet to be walked to its end.' And he walked away from her and busied himself in the matters of state that were always now before him.

For now the time had come for the freeing of Shand itself. All their enemies, rebels, outlaws, Reavers and Turgalin followers of deposed Baladac, had withdrawn to the heart of

the realm and made a ring of steel about the Seat of Stonehammer, the centre of the Four Kingdoms, in the cold of the winter. Arime and the other kings and lords stayed far into the icy nights plotting strategems and ploys for breaking this ring and driving the enemy out of Shand, and as they plotted they rode ever northward, through the wide fields of the South Vale, until they came within sight of the enemies' scouts and halted.

Arime's army was now very large, swelled by the peoples and arms of the Middle Lands. Row upon row of coloured banners and bright pavilions greeted the bright morning sun, and when Arime stood on a hilltop before the enemy and revealed Sundergost to them, glinting in the winter sunlight, many of his foes understood that all was lost, and some came forth under banners of parley and sued for peace. But others fought on bloodily, not willing to abandon so lightly that which they had lusted after for so long. In the end, Arime triumphed: the Turgalins were pardoned or imprisoned by their new Emperor, and Arime set the Reavers to repairing the carnage and burning they had caused, and then banished them to the Great Western Wild, the vast tract of forest and wild land to the west, where no man now went.

The Shandhall was purged of evil and cleansed, and Lonia walked through its golden halls enthralled and amazed by their great beauty, catching as they did through many windows of coloured glass the light of the westering sun and spilling it like liquid firelight until no corner of that place seemed enshadowed, for the invaders had not dared to despoil that place. There she looked upon the great Throne of Lond, the high throne of Shand, set amid splendour she had

not imagined, and there came all the great of the realms far about to do homage to their High King with his Golden Sword, returned unlooked for from the shadows of the past—but Arime would not set a date for his coronation, and in their joy and wonder, some pondered on this and said that their new lord was a young man most serious and thoughtful. But none doubted his bounty nor questioned his inheritance.

And all was not yet done—for though the hosts that had occupied Shand had been defeated and cast out, evil bands still harried the borders and were not yet subdued. As the winter wore on, the kings and lords together rode north and west to Miria, there to crown the young prince Kirraen and to protect that realm from an army of Reavers which had taken to the foothills of the northern mountains.

A great company was made ready and they made their way through the water-meadows and vales of Miria to its chief city on the shores of a lake, and as they rode all thought of darkness and shadows and strife lifted for a while from Lonia's heart—she was in Shand, at peace, and had come through great peril to fulfilment, and she was determined not to think beyond that. But deep in her heart was a dark misgiving that she rode not towards light but into a colder night.

The land was, however, very beautiful, even in the dead of winter, in parts like her home Restonia but with a mistiness and a haunting twilight which made her sing in the evening. From its hilltops she could see far away in the west the huge expanse of unpeopled forest, far greater in size than the Wood of Seven, which was the Great Western Wild; before it,

bordering the wild, gleamed the Shandbound river, westernmost water of the Four Kingdoms. To the north, on the edge of sight, she could make out the line of the Penning, that great cluster of snowbound mountain which legend held impenetrable. To the east lay the open plains of Valadria; and all about them was the serenity of deep winter.

Kirraen was crowned then with the silver crown of Miria before the Lords of Shand; he went out before his people and a great celebration began which lasted far into the night. But Arime, though he had played his part in the ceremony, did not enter into the celebrations, and Lonia found him staring northward from the balcony of one of the rooms of the palace. He embraced her and they looked out together across the fields as the stars came out.

'Look for my face in the Pools of Kaela, he said,' said Arime quietly to her.

'I knew thou wert thinking of him,' she said, looking up at him. 'But what did his words mean?'

'Kirraen told me that there is a legend that Kaela walked in the land of Miria long ago and blessed many of its waters. And Valkurn came here to bless Sundergost in a lake now lost in history.'

'Then will you seek him, the one-eyed man, here?'

'I am of that mind, yes,' he said, 'for though all around me are full of joy, I cannot feel content, as you know. Something is left still to do —something terrible.'

Lonia was quiet for a while. She was thinking again of her dread and the image of herself she had seen in the Twisted Mirror. She gripped his hand.

'I will come with thee,' she said.

‘Again?’ he said, smiling, ‘or should I say “still”? For thou hast never left my side.’

‘Nor will I ever, if it were my choice,’ said Lonia. ‘Yet I too feel a foreboding. The words that were spoken as thou lay abed in Tara stirred something in me, too. There is a shadow as yet untouched in our hearts, and over the world. What are we to do? Where are we to go?’

‘There is no one to consult, no one to ask —not unless we ride to Wenfold to speak once more with the Warden,’ said Arime.

‘Thou art the High King. Thou shouldst not need counsel overmuch —and thou art wiser now than when thou rode alone from Helca’s Castle and broke thine oath to me.’

‘Am I? I wonder,’ he said, pausing. Then he turned to her. ‘Lonia, whatever betide, let me make another oath to thee, one I will not break. I swear now, and will swear before the high lords in time, that it is thee I would wed, and to thee I will remain true, as long as life remains to me. What sayest thou?’

‘I swear likewise,’ she said, and they kissed —but a cold dread gripped her fleetingly as they did. She dismissed it from her mind. ‘Let us ride a little before we retire —a restlessness stirs in me.’

He nodded.

‘Aye, in me too,’ he said, ‘as though a voice calls to me, but I know not whose it is.’

They went quietly down to the stables then, and told the groom there that they went for a night ride around part of the lake, and would be back before long.

‘Do not linger too long in those parts, sire,’ said the

groom, 'for the mists grow savagely quick there, and mighty cold is the wind from the north in this season, and many a rider has been lost on those roads. And they say phantoms haunt the woods hereabouts.'

'Nevertheless, the kingdom is safe,' said Lonia, 'and it will take more than phantoms of the fog to frighten the High King bearing the Sword Sundergost.'

The groom bowed and they mounted and rode away into the autumn night.

They rode for some time without speaking. The night was peaceful, and once they had left the castle where the revellers danced and made music, a great quiet descended on the pale countryside. Winding lanes led them down to the frozen waterside and then off north to the tops of lonely snow-crested hills, from where they looked down on the twinkling lights of the castle and villages far below.

It was now the middle of the night. Arime had planned to be gone for an hour or two, idly hoping to come across one of Miria's many pools. The restlessness gnawed at him, Lonia saw, but could not pierce his calmness at first. Lonia rode at his side in silence —to her also it seemed that they were beckoned out of the castle by some silent voice.

But, in her heart at least, it was a dark voice.

'Arime, my love,' she said, 'we should go back.'

He drew closer to her.

'What is it?' he said gently. 'Thou art troubled. What disturbs thee?'

'I do not know,' she said, 'but I feel suddenly afraid —as though dark hands reach out towards us. I wonder if the

Twisted Mirror that now lies broken, and the armies that now lie defeated, were the only powers the enemy had in the lands of the west.'

Arime looked around them. They were in a deep meadow. A thin mist was gathering around the edges of the forest.

'Very well,' he said, 'let us return.'

They rode off. After a while, though, Lonia noticed something was wrong —there seemed to be trees all around them, though they had not ridden through trees on this part of the road, she was certain. She looked at Arime —he too was looking around, peering through the ever-thickening mist.

He pointed. A gap had opened up in the fog, and what seemed to be a clear road led ahead. They rode on. But it was only a few moments later that they realised they were on the wrong road, for this path led into a dark pine forest. Arime spurred his horse on, losing patience, and climbed a treeless hill that sloped up from the road.

They emerged onto its crown. Pale moonlight lay around them, and they were out of the mist which now swathed the forest below. But they had ridden much further north than they thought possible: the impenetrable northern mountains were now sharp and hard in the night before them. They could see no sign of the lake or castle from which they had ridden. Lonia shivered, and the shiver turned slowly into a tremble of cold and fear which she could not subdue. Their horses became restless, pawing at the ground and half-rearing at wisps of fog.

Nothing could be heard in the night except for their own horses and their own breathing.

'We shall find our way back by the moon,' said Arime. 'We can be no more than an hour from the castle.'

Lonia nodded but they waited for a few moments as though pinned by some invisible force. Then Lonias gasped.

Ahead, the fog swirled suddenly, and from it there emerged the dark figure of a tall, hooded man, standing a hundred paces away.

'Ho there!' cried Arime. 'Who are you who travel in the realm of Miria, held under the High King of Shand?'

But the figure did not answer and instead began to move towards them. He seemed to walk in a dream, raising a dark hand as he came. His face could not be seen under the black hood he wore.

She heard Arime gasp in terror as he drew near, and he whispered under his breath: 'The Hooded Man!'

She made to draw her sword, but the faceless darkness that was where the figure's face should have been looked at her, and she stopped. Her hand fell from the hilt of her sword. All the darkness of that night seemed to issue from that face. She felt herself slipping into it, called by it. She urged her horse forward, but it walked only a few paces then reared up, threw her roughly onto the ground and bolted. She got up, but was still held by the hooded figure's gaze. He towered over her now, a black, formless shape. Soon she would be in his arms. The darkness welcomed her.

Suddenly Arime had dismounted and was dashing at the shape. Something unbearably bright and sharp in the misty blackness swung past her, and she heard him cry out—but Sundergost—for it was the Sword, as she now saw—sailed through the phantom form as though it had no substance at

all. Arime fell back, breathing hard. Part of her felt for him, seeing him distressed, but part of her wondered why he was afraid —could he not feel the welcoming pull of the deep shadows, the great and dark joys that beckoned within? She put out her hand to take his, but he fell back from her, his face full of terror.

She turned again to the Hooded Man. She went with him. Soon her dark companion turned and looked back. Arime stood some way behind, breathing hard. He was shouting something, but she could not understand him.

Then the hooded shape spoke to Arime:

‘Thou took my mother from me, as I did from thee,’ it said in a voice that seemed to be the voice of the fog itself, ‘and I now take thy bride from thee, as thou did from me —thou shall not have her again. For she shall be wed to the Dragonlord in Midsummer in the heart of darkness, and no man may put them asunder! Nor can the sword of thy hand sever the terror of thy heart, for my power is mightier than swords. Remember, thy guide burned in the Underworld and is dead. So does the shadow of thy soul ever betray thee, Arime, son of Ryna, child of the line of Valkurn, the hated one!’

Then the spectre laughed, a horrible sound that held in it all the cold wickedness of the world, and Lonia heard herself laugh with it.

She watched then with detachment as she was embraced with cold and, as she turned to face Arime again, it seemed she looked down as from a great height onto his trembling figure. She still pitied him, but it was from a great distance, as though she pitied someone in the dim past, or in a story

from an ancient book. He was receding now —she saw him, a tiny figure holding a shining sword, as he fell to his knees, then fell to the earth, and she imagined the cold despair of his heart as she was taken from him, as his mother had been, as his sister had been. But she was watching only —she was not sure any more of anything, and all the world became a shifting mist, and she knew no more.

Wormstone

Book Three of
The Sword Sundergost

THE LOST VALLEY

*And Vorandor blessed Raendu for bringing him to sanctuary
beyond hope.*

-from The Tale of Vorandor

It was the very heart of winter, deep in the mountains. Nawn sat and watched the flames of his fire slowly consume the logs that rested there, carving out tiny kingdoms of light and shadow as they burned. Flakes of silent snow were climbing up the window of the small house as he drifted on the edge of sleep—it would be easy enough, he thought, to imitate the beasts of the season and sleep until spring came again. His eyes were heavy, and the mug of warm mead in his hand drooped as he dozed.

But what would that spring bring? Another year of toil in the forests, another year surrounded by the impenetrable mountains of the Valley. This year it would be harder—the work would seem heavier to him, the hours of the day longer: for he missed his father, though he had left the Valley long ago. He had loved his father, and his father had returned his love, teaching his young son all that he knew of woodcraft, of the rudiments of handling swords, of hunting and of the building of a home—and of songs, best of all. But he had known, when he was still a child, that his father would have to leave.

He was not sure why he had known this, but he had known it with great certainty. His father had told Nawn of the lands of the Outside, and of how he had found the

Hidden Valley years before, being pursued by foes; and how he had come down into its green depths beyond hope, and there found and married Nawn's mother in the spring of his youth. Nawn's mother had died, when Nawn was five years old—he still visited her grave almost every day—but with his mother's death a change had come over his father: a restlessness had taken him, and the mountains themselves seemed unable to contain him. So he had gone, riding away before the first snows of the following year, and Nawn knew that he would never see him alive again.

That had been hard enough, but to now feel the same restlessness, or a shadow of it, in his own heart was like a curse: the mountains of the Penning, the vast bulk of rock and ice that once seemed so protective and which none passed without loss, now seemed like the walls of a prison. It was not that he did not love the Valley—its deep green folds, its woods, its rushing streams, its quiet people, all these things were strong in him with the strength that years bring—but he wanted more than they held suddenly, unexpectedly, and he knew that he would now never be content to remain here for the rest of his life. He was already a young man; he had already fallen in love—with Alween, the beautiful daughter of Tolly, the head of the village; he had already mastered the farm and forest his father had left to him—but there was more. Something waited for him outside those eternal mountain walls, he knew not what. It was as though his father called to him.

Before his father had ridden in from the Outside many years before, the Valley had remained inviolate, untouched by the strife and wars that raged without: here the seasons

went about their business unsullied by blood or anguish in the hearts of men; here, the people who had come with Vorandor into the Valley a thousand years before lived in peace, and closed their hearts to the world beyond the white walls of their home. This was easy to do, for the Valley was large, it could feed them all with plenty, and it was surrounded by impenetrable masses of stone, and in its fields blossomed Farndonath, the ancient flower which gave protection against evil. Here the descendants of Vorandor dwelt in great contentment, and that long peace had swallowed even his father's coming, and they had welcomed him.

But a fire burned within Nawn as he watched the flames of his hearth glow the soft wood into embers of gold and red, and he wanted suddenly to leave, to escape the tyranny of those mountains, to run wild through the unknown fields of distant lands, to breathe an air which blew across unrestrained plains of grass, to answer the unknown call. He wanted to see his father's first home —perhaps even his father's grave— and he wanted to look into the green depths of the great forests that he had heard covered much of the lands Outside. He desired to speak with other folk —he had little knowledge of what lands waited for him, nor whether they would understand his speech: perhaps other peoples now spoke with a different tongue, so long had it been since Vorandor had founded the Valley and hidden his people from the world. Visions of cities beyond his imagining, mighty kings and vast treasures, the things of tales and songs, had come to fill his mind daily. Somehow he felt he belonged out there. He did not, then, look forward to the

spring, with its rituals and routines, and the daily demand for deeds to be done.

Not that his work was overly hard. Nawn had the work of a farmer, and it had passed to him also to watch over that part of the wood near his home, an ancient duty from the first days of the Valley—but the watchfulness had always been in vain: for all his life, none had entered the Valley, and the mountains protected it, just as they had done for over a thousand years. Even though he was alone now, Nawn knew that he could do what was needed. Indeed, part of his restlessness was this knowledge—doing the deeds that were well within his power each day had begun to irk him. He yearned for freedom from them.

He was alone in that, he knew. The others of the Valley frowned or gazed at him blankly when he spoke of the wide lands Outside. Already, being the son of the only stranger to settle in the Valley for generations, he was on the fringes of their world; now, and especially since his father had left, he had felt pushed out further, and they avoided him, he thought, and spoke behind him in whispers when he went to their markets. As he had grown through youth himself he had begun to see that he was indeed alone in many more ways than one: alone at the farm on the edge of the wood, alone in his desires, alone by token of his blood, and alone with his secrets.

For Nawn had another thing that divided him from the folk of the Valley—it was his link with the world beyond, the thing that did more to keep alive these unspoken desires of his heart than anything else. His father had found it when he first came down the Shining Stairs into the Valley; and he

had shown it to his son alone, and Nawn had wondered at it, for it was a marvel greater than anything that he had seen, and he had kept it to himself and visited it in secret, and the knowledge of it had slowly driven yet another wedge between himself and the others.

He had drifted from them, and, unmoored, his spirit waited for some current to sweep it away. Again, as he stared into the flames, he wondered if he had been touched by a kind of curse. Perhaps some magic had indeed reached him from the depths of that thing his father had shown him: he remembered his father's words: 'Watch for me —for I may come again, or Raendu will send thee a sign.'

He had grown even drowsier as he thought. The slow crackle of the fire, and the silently climbing snow ushered him towards sleep. The mug slipped further in his hand; his eyes closed.

Suddenly, he was jolted awake. He started, and the mead spilled as he jumped. He was sure that there had been a knock on the door —but that was strange, for his home was far from any often-used road, and he had hardly ever been visited by any in the village. More especially, it was snowing, and he could not imagine who would journey willingly in such weather. He clambered to his feet and went to the door.

As he pulled it open, snow collapsed inward into the cottage and the quiet breath of the winter entered with it. Outside, the white flakes fell soundlessly to the earth, drifting down through the pale shadows of the surrounding trees. No one was there. With difficulty, shoving out the snow, he closed the door and returned to the warmth of the fire, which he bent and stirred to new life. He refilled his

mug and sat down again.

The evening crept on a little longer. Again, overcome with a warm drowsiness, Nawn dozed in front of the fire. But again, as he crossed the frontier into sleep there came another jarring sound, or something on the edge of sound, and he jumped awake. This time he had definitely felt the knock on the door. He got up and opened it.

The light was greyer, but the snow, though more gentle now, still fell on an empty world. No one could be seen. Nawn looked up and down path which ran by his gate — nothing moved but the crystal flakes, falling.

He returned to the fire again, and remained awake for a while as the darkness grew outside. He peered into the embers as they slowly turned black. With the last glow, his eyes closed again.

This time there could be no doubt —something had struck his door, or a voice had called out his name. He was suddenly certain that someone was trying to stir him, summoning him. He went to the door, but nothing moved outside. The snow had almost stopped. He put on his thick coat and gathered his cloak about him, and plunged out into the white landscape.

Something had called to him, of that he was certain. He did not know whether it was human or not. As he walked through the crunching whiteness and into the first trees, it occurred to him that the solitude and serenity which a life surrounded by mountains had engendered in him might be false. What if this summons was not a friendly one? But, never needing his sword nor any weapon in the Valley, Nawn had not brought one, and he paused as he lost sight of

his cottage through the trees and wondered if he should turn back.

Just as he did so, a shape fluttered ahead of him between the grey tree-trunks. It might have been a bird, or merely a falling twig, he could not tell—but a chill shiver went through him that had little to do with the coldness of the air. He stopped. The wood was silent—even more silent than it had been, he thought. Only a few flakes of snow now fell, but the magic of snow was that it made no sound itself while muffling all others. He peered into the darkness of the wood. It suddenly struck him that it was folly to come out into the night at such a time of year. Were he to become lost, he could perish—he should return at once to his cottage and hearth.

But the idea of becoming lost in the wood over which he watched was one which he could too easily dismiss—he saw through the workings of his own mind to the fear that spoke thus. He looked about him. Nothing else moved, but he felt that the summons, if summons it was, came still from straight ahead, and he walked on.

After a while he came to the thicker part of the wood, and the land began to steadily slope upwards into the first foothills of the surrounding mountains. Here, the snow, blocked by the thick canopy above, had fallen more lightly, and though the undergrowth was tangled in places, the going was easier. Nawn quickly came to a small dell in the slope—and he saw something lying at the bottom.

Regretting now even more that he had not brought his sword, Nawn made his way slowly down to the bottom of the dell. A tall man lay there, face down in the snow, a great sword at his side. He was still, and his cloak was covered

partly by snow, as though he had lain there for some time. Nawn came closer. The man did not stir.

Nawn eventually shook the body, and then managed to turn it over. Though he was young and strong, the man was heavy. He looked down into the face that looked up at him — its eyes were closed in a frown of pain and exhaustion, but it was a handsome face, younger in years than his own, but nobler and deeper, Nawn thought, as though it had seen many things. He also realised, with a surge of excitement which warmed him, that he did not know the face. He knew almost everyone in the Valley, and the clothes —rich, coloured travelling gear— and the style of dress confirmed what the strange face seemed to say: this was an Outsider, as Nawn's father had been.

But, stranger or not, the man was obviously on the edge of death. Though he still breathed, there was scarcely any warmth in him. Nawn looked about him: he had to get the newcomer back to his cottage or he would certainly perish before morning. There was nothing in the dell, however, to help him. At first, Nawn thought of building a fire there, and went to fetch the man's sword from his belt so that he could bring down some firewood from the surrounding trees —but, when he went to draw the great sword from its blue and scarlet scabbard, his heart leapt: the young man's hand had stirred, and, quicker than light, had clamped a fist around the hilt. It would not move from it. Nawn looked at the blade that the hand had protected: it was mostly hidden by its scabbard, but seemed to be made of gold. Nawn had never seen anything finer.

Instead, then, Nawn fell to dragging the unconscious body

up from the dell and through the wood. It was slow work, for the man was heavy with cold, and did not stir again, Nawn wondered if, by the time he had reached the cottage, he would be dragging a dead man into his home, but, as he finally crossed the threshold, he could see that his burden breathed still.

He brought him closer to the fire, and, laying him by the hearth, he stirred new life into the embers and put two logs on. Soon a small blaze burned and the room filled with heat. Nawn took off his own cloak and coat, and removed the other's frozen boots and wet cloak. Red light flickered across the face of the man as he lay there: he was taller, Nawn judged, than most of the people of the Valley; his hands were strong, and his hair dark.

As he warmed some mead, he wondered if this stranger were from the same land as his own father, and how he had found his way into the Valley.

He turned from the flames to see the man looking at him. Some colour had returned to the stranger's face, but he did not speak. Nawn propped him up with a pillow, and slowly fed him some mead. The stranger's eyes were dark and deep—Nawn was not sure if they looked out at him or at some other, unseen world. Gradually, as the fire burned and the mead did its work, they seemed to defrost a little, and Nawn saw the firelight reflected there. They watched each other in silence.

Every now and then the man seemed wracked with a sudden pain, and he cringed slightly. Perhaps, Nawn thought, as his blood warmed it had to melt parts that had been frozen too long in the snow, or perhaps wounds which

the cold had robbed of pain now returned to trouble him. Nawn was not certain—but he did notice that the man never released the hilt of his sword as he drank.

The night went slowly by, but all trace of sleep had gone from Nawn, and he sat with the stranger until the faint light of day began to show through the windows. Neither of them had yet spoken, and the newcomer had scarcely moved all night. With dawn, though, came his first words.

‘I am still in the world of men, then,’ he said, half to himself, and Nawn heard in his words the strange manner of speaking that was like his father’s, but he could understand the meaning.

‘Do you not know where you are?’ Nawn asked. The man looked at him for a long time without answering.

‘I have wandered long. I thought I sought death,’ he said in a distant voice at last. ‘Perhaps I died indeed—but the gods have seen fit to prolong my torment, it seems. You saved my life. I do not know whether to thank you or curse you for that.’

Nawn paused, saying nothing. But the man’s stern, pale face broke into a thin smile after a few moments.

‘That is ungracious, my friend, and you must forgive me,’ he said. ‘Tell me, where am I indeed, and who are you, my host?’

‘I am Nawn, called Woodwarden,’ said Nawn, ‘and you are in the Hidden Valley of Vorandor in the mountains where few come.’

‘Vorandor?’ the man said to himself. ‘I have heard that name in legends. Vorandor the King of Vildon led a great people out of the disaster of the Enchanted Kingdoms, but he

vanished from the history of the world that I know. Have I stepped into a tale, or through a door into the past? What mountains are these of which you speak?’

‘I do not know what they are called on the Outside. Within, we call them the Penning,’ said Nawn.

‘The Penning! It is the same name —but I did not realise that I had come so far north. So —Vorandor disappeared into the Penning, and his people live on still. The world is very strange. How stubbornly life clings on. Even that which we think lost forever turns up in some forgotten corner.’

He fell silent, and suddenly Nawn saw that tears were glistening in his eyes.

The stranger felt them, and brushed them away.

‘Forgive me again, my host and saviour,’ he said, looking into the fire. ‘I have lost much, and wandered long in madness in the wild. I must give you my name, and yet I have forgotten the name I once had. You must call me Bron, that means Dead One in a tongue I know. In time you and I both may come to find my true name. Until then, I weep for losses that I can scarcely recall. It is strange indeed to be mad —one is like a rider on a bolting steed, when all the strength of the rider is not enough to guide the beast of one’s mind to the safe road. Any moment one may plunge over a cliff. Soon one rides so far that all roads are lost. I have only my clothes and my sword to tell me who I am.’

He drew the blade from the sheath. Nawn stared at it in astonishment —its long, slender shape was golden, and it reflected the firelight back from the hearth but seemed also to have a light of its own.

‘Some things I know,’ Bron went on, ‘but others elude me.

I know that this sword is the mightiest that I have seen or held, but I remember no other sword clearly; I know that I have ridden here from the lands to the south, through great sorrows and adventures, but the names of those lands, or whether I rode alone, I do not know. Nay, I think not alone — not alone,' he added, again speaking half to himself.

'I know some tales of men,' he went on, 'but I do not know where I heard them; I remember fragments of the world's tongues, but not the world in which they are spoken. I am like a half-man, a dead man —and so, call me Bron, as I have said. You saved only half a life it seems —but your deed was well-meant, and will bring you good in the end.'

He nodded to Nawn then, and sipped at his mead. Nawn did not know what to say. He stirred himself and made a broth which warmed them both further. Colour now came swiftly back into Bron's hands and face, and the heat spread until the stranger could sit in a chair before the fire —but he was still very weak, and could not stand. Occasionally, as that day wore on, the stranger would fall into a half-sleep, during which he would sometimes cry out, or speak odd, disconnected words; at other times he simply stared silently into the fire. He was for the most part graceful and courteous, but Nawn sensed the deep bitterness and blankness within him, and they spoke little.

He remained with Nawn for the rest of that winter, and during that time he recovered his strength rapidly, and was undisturbed, for Nawn had few visitors, and did not take Bron into the village where he met Alween —he did not even mention his visitor to her, and they grew a little estranged

because of it. Nawn found that he had come to welcome the strange company that he had been sent —yet he sometimes wondered: if Bron had been too weak to move on that night when Nawn had found him some distance away in the dell, then who had knocked on Nawn’s door in the night? And what power had led him to the dell where Bron had lain? For, had he not been brought to that exact place at that time, Bron would surely have perished. Someone —or something, Nawn thought with a shiver— was watching over the destiny of this young warrior.

But, as the weeks went by, and Bron grew in strength so that he could walk about with the aid of a stick and help with the work of the place, Nawn saw that the newcomer was not as black-hearted as he had at first seemed —he could laugh, and tell tales, and he even recalled one or two songs. And, moreover, though he could not remember names or many details, he knew much about the Outside, and Nawn found that his great yearning to journey there was in part satisfied through these things. But Nawn learned not to question his new companion too closely —Bron seemed able to relate legends and tales that he had learned, he said, in his forgotten youth, but when it came to matters closer to hand —things to do with the current state of the world, or how he had managed to find his way into the Valley— Bron grew short of temper, and his memory failed him, and the great grief that Nawn had glimpsed before welled up in him again. Nawn learned to avoid such matters —he did not want to close the window on the Outside that fortune had opened for him.

In this way, the rest of the winter went by, and the first

signs of the spring thaw could be seen: the lessening frosts, the tiny buds, the first scouts of returning birds, and the general movement in the world. Then Nawn took to thinking about the Outside more earnestly—but Bron fell more silent, and as the snows melted, he seemed to grow more stern, replacing the frozen landscape with an inner coldness of heart. Nawn wondered then how long the stranger's dark spirit would let him stay in the Valley—but Bron showed no signs of going.

One evening, as the warmth of spring enabled the two of them to sit out-of-doors for the first time, Nawn fell to thinking of the Outside again, and wondering if indeed Bron's arrival opened the door on a way out of the Valley for him—he had been too afraid to go alone, but if he had a companion perhaps he would find the courage? He was wondering how to draw out his friend on this subject when Bron, perhaps perceiving his thought, interrupted him.

'I have told you many a tale, such as I could recall, from the world outside your mountains,' he said. 'What of within? Do your people remember any tale from the Enchanted Kingdoms? Is the tale of Vorandor's coming to this valley recorded in song?'

Nawn nodded.

'Indeed, I know the tale as it was told to me, but I am no minstrel,' he said. The golden ring on Bron's hand caught his eye. Bron saw him looking at it. It had the device of the rune 'R' on it, like a seal.

'I wonder at it too,' Bron said, 'and I wonder if "R" is the letter of my name. But I cannot recall it.'

'The ring reminded me of a tale,' Nawn said, 'and as that

tale is part of the tale of Vorandor's coming to the Valley, I will tell it.'

The pale twilight glowed in the branches of the trees above them as he began.

'Kelva was the daughter of Vorandor and Estea and she was very innocent of heart and loved to dance upon the wild green. She loved all things and the world was her garden, but she loved most of all the creatures of the stream, of the river and pool, both those that drank there and those that dwelt within the water. Her laughter was like a waterfall, and she could speak to many wild creatures and knew the ways of the wild like no other.

'One day, dancing along a shallow bed of streams in the Enchanted Kingdoms, she was found by Oroban, the god of the river, who fell in love with her. When Kelva freed an otter from a bramble on the riverbank, Oroban spoke to her and wooed her and she dwelt with him a while in the secret places of the river, far from the lands of ordinary folk.

'When his daughter did not return from the wild, Vorandor went out himself to seek for her, and coming through Oroban's enchantments he found her and was at first dismayed. But Oroban asked for the hand of Kelva, and the king saw that they shared a genuine love —yet he deemed it unfit that a daughter of his should wed a spirit of the wild water, and said that in turn for her hand the river-god must abandon the treasure dearest to his heart.

'Oroban then fetched the Ring of Rivers, which he had made with long labour, working with water and stone, and it was a silver ring, smooth but with the appearance of being rough-hewn: and that ring held part of the spirit of the rivers

of the Enchanted Kingdoms and would give to the wearer the gift of speech to the things of the wild, beasts, birds and fishes.'

An owl hooted somewhere in the wood, as Nawn paused, his mind full of images of the kingdoms of the north, where no one who now lived in the Valley had ever been, and where it was said the magic of the ancient world lingered in forest, stream and hill.

'Vorandor was moved by Oroban's gift,' he went on, 'and he loved the ring more than anything except Kelva, and he himself wed his daughter Kelva to the river-god by the stream, and gave the ring to his daughter, signifying the marriage. And from then on Kelva dwelt for part of the year with Estea and Vorandor in Vildon, and for part in the wild world of Oroban.

'But when the Enchantress was freed and the Firstpeace was broken, and the Great Winter descended, the people of Elvale became a wandering folk without direction. It was then that Vorandor of Elvale, and Estea, exiled queen of Sushsilver, attempted to throw down Solveer, who the Morndred had set up to rule the Enchanted Kingdoms of the north. But they failed to topple Solveer —and Estea dreamt of the Lady of Night, who warned her that the days of the Enchanted Kingdoms were numbered, and that hope now lay hidden —but she spoke also of a future good that would come in time of the despair that had befallen the people of Elvale, and Estea told her husband of her vision.

'So Vorandor's quest to re-unite the Four Kingdoms of Vildon failed, and he fled from there with his people, heeding his wife's words and the guidance of the gods —but

they were harried by Solveer, and their treasures were taken, even the Ring of Rivers, cut from the hand of Kelva, daughter of the King, before she died.

‘On hearing of his daughter’s cruel slaying, Vorandor put on his silver armour in silence and rode out against the wishes of Estea and he broke through the lines of the enemy and challenged Solveer. Solveer was craven, seeing the silver king in the mists and starlight on the hilltop, and he sent out the wicked and mis-shapen beast-men to waylay him—but Vorandor in his rage slew all but one of the creatures, and sent that one back with a message, demanding the Ring. To this Solveer agreed, and he sent the Ring to Vorandor, and was never more feared by the forces he led. But Solveer cursed his unfaithful host, saying that they would find no freedom until one greater than he released them from their guard of those mountains into which Vorandor had withdrawn.

‘Vorandor mourned Kelva his daughter, and buried the Ring of Rivers in her grave—and so passed from the world two of the greatest treasures of the Enchanted Realms of old.

‘Then the King took his people—and such was their grief and their wrath that none of their enemies dared to approach them—and disappeared from the fields of battle into the higher and forbidding passes of the Penning mountains which no one had explored.

‘Vorandor led them on through the snow with a will of iron, but he was separated from them in a blizzard, seeking a way ahead, and he fell into an abyss and was believed lost. Neberon the Herald, uncle and dear friend of the king, wept for the first time in his long life, and many mourned and

despaired.

‘But Vorandor had not perished —he had been borne by a mighty wind and landed unharmed in a deep drift of snow, and he wandered long, lost and cold with frost, descending the Shining Stairs, that some later called the Wraith Stairs, down into the sunlit foothills.

‘Hearing the sound of water he bathed his frost-blinded eyes in a Pool, an ancient water that had been blessed by Kaela long ago, and saw before him as his sight returned the sun shining on a deep, broad valley, brimming with green life, and the breeze brought to him the sweet scent of Farndonath, Dragon’s Bane, shining in the Fields of Flame along the swift river. And it seemed to him that the prayers of his people had been answered.’

But Bron had suddenly gasped, and Nawn paused. He knew that he had come to that part of the tale perilously close to the secret that his father had not wanted him to reveal —but he was caught now, one foot over the threshold. He wondered how much his companion guessed.

‘No, no, go on!’ urged Bron. ‘Your words touched something in me —I thought I saw images —faces, half-seen, half-remembered— but they have passed. Go on!’

‘Vorandor stood there by that pool for a long while,’ Nawn continued, ‘as though carved from stone, and as the Bright Star rose in the heavens, he blessed the pool and sat down on a stone and sang a song of thankfulness for the mercy of Raendu and Kaela, and a soft wind bore that song for many leagues. And the stone on which he sat became the Golden Knoll, a place of enchantment, and the Pool became a Seeing Water of great power.

‘Far away in the mountains Estea heard that voice, and amid the wailing of the people there was a silence and a wonder —then she took up that song and followed the voice down from the mountains and so they came at last to the green valley as the sun was rising.

‘Then Estea and Vorandor hallowed the valley and tended to their folk, and putting out what enchantment remained to them from Elvale whence they had come, they set a girdle of protection about the mountains. And Solveer, their enemy, knew not how his foes had escaped, for they vanished from the lands and were not seen again in that age.’

Nawn finished the tale. Silence fell between them.

‘A tale worth remembering,’ said Bron, ‘for did not the king come through great hardship and despair to the sanctuary of Hope again? He followed the path laid out for him by Raendu —I must have wandered far from mine. And yet, have I not walked down that same road, and come to peace myself?’

Nawn said nothing, but a struggle raged within him: on the one hand, his promise to his father to preserve a great secret; on the other, his pity for and desire to help this stranger who had, after all, walked that seldom-used path himself into the hidden haven that Vorandor had found. What was he to do?

Then he saw the answer to his dilemma —he would visit the place of his secret himself that very night. He would use the power of the secret itself to find guidance.

A chill breeze had sprung up as the night had grown dark, and they went indoors and to bed —but, when he was certain that Bron slept, Nawn crept through the cottage,

donned his boots, coat and cloak and opened the door. It creaked, but a glance at Bron's face showed only that the man had frowned and tightened his grip upon the hilt of his sword that never left his side. Nawn closed the door and made his way down the path deep into the wood.

It twisted and wound through the darkness, up and down into a fold in the surrounding hills. His father, Nawn knew, had chosen his home to be close to the secret place, but the way was still quite far. Grey light was growing in the east before Nawn, wet with dew and cold, turned the last corner and looked upon it.

There, before him, lay a pool of grey water, ten feet wide, fed by a trickling stream that poured down a sheer face of rock ahead. Short trees, still in their winter bareness, surrounded the pool, gathering close. Near at hand, a large finger of golden rock thrust out of the earth and bent over the water. Climbing this, Nawn looked down over the trees, over the lip of the hollow, through the fold in the hills, across the broad and wide and deep valley which was all the world he had ever known.

He knew as he sat there, that this was the very pool that Vorandor had looked into and blessed an age ago. Lost since then, it had been found by Nawn's father when he too had wandered down the same road years ago—but, seeing that this was a magical place, fit to be revered in song, not visited by all, he had kept his findings secret, and had made his son swear to do the same.

But Nawn knew that his father had been a wise and good man, and that he would not deny the need of a man such as Bron. If he had been here, Nawn thought, he would do as I

would do. But Nawn wanted to be sure. He wanted to know with certainty that he did right in breaking this oath of secrecy. And the only way he knew of attaining that certainty was to look in the Pool itself —for he had sometimes seen things there, images, illusions perhaps, lights and shadows, but enough to know that this water was enchanted still, and could show him things beyond the walls of the mountains, and give him solace in times of anguish. He had come here when his mother died and found peace; he had come here after his father had left, and though the Pool had not cured his restlessness it had seemed to give him hope. Now he turned from the Valley and looked down into its waters again. Here he hoped to find out what he should do, and the meaning of this newcomer's presence in the Valley.

But he stepped back, almost losing his balance —for in the depths of the water he saw the shape of a man standing there by the edge, looking down at it too.

It was Bron. He had been followed.

THE WATERS OF KAELA

The tapestry of true light and life is not what the mortal eye sees, but a different world, linked by water, wood, fire, and the spirit. It is stronger by far than the dream of stone that mortals call real.

-from The Book of Seven

There was a long moment of silence. Then a few birds, far off in the woods, began to sing as they sensed the approach of the dawn. Nawn clambered down from the rock and faced Bron. The stranger simply stood there, staring at him and at the water.

‘This is it, is it not?’ he said at last. ‘This is the water that was in your tale, this is Vorandor’s Pool.’

Nawn nodded —the choice, then, had been taken from him. The man, cleverer in woodcraft than he, had been able to follow him all the way without Nawn suspecting even once.

Bron went closer to the water’s edge and crouched down, lost in some deep thought of his own. For a long time nothing moved and neither of them spoke —then Bron looked up at Nawn, and Nawn saw the great pain that the other was suffering.

‘Help me!’ muttered Bron. ‘In Raendu’s name, help me!’

He turned back to the water.

‘What is it?’ asked Nawn. ‘What can I do?’

‘You cannot know what it is, not to know yourself,’ said Bron, after a moment, staring into the grey water. The shadows of the bare trees, dim in the faint light, were

reflected in its still surface. Only the thin trickle of water down the face of the rock could be heard.

‘It is like a void within,’ Bron went on. ‘It is as though the whole world spins, and there is nothing with which to anchor yourself. Any wind that blows may be the wind that you should pursue. You do not know. Forgive me, friend, I did not follow you to intrude upon your secret out of any fear of betrayal —I followed you because my soul is desperate to know, and I sensed that you did not tell all in your tale. This is your secret still —none will learn of it from Bron. So swear I, by my sword.’

And so saying, he half-unsheathed the sword at his side, and its golden blade glimmered in the depths of the water. They both looked suddenly —though it was not yet sunrise, it had seemed that sunlight had passed across the Pool as briefly as breath.

‘This water is indeed special,’ said Bron, re-sheathing the blade. ‘And this out-thrusting rock, is this where Vorandor himself sat when he came out of misery into hope? Then let me climb it, with your leave, and look down from that place.’

Nawn nodded, and Bron quickly scaled the golden finger of stone and looked about him. Nawn followed, and stood beside him.

‘The hidden hope of the gods rests here in this Valley of yours —so said the Dark Lady in the tale,’ Bron went on. ‘I wonder where it lies? Your people, you say, have forgotten the outside world whence they came. How then are they to be the hope of the realms of men? And this place is so far removed from the wars beyond its mountains —would that the whole world could be brought in here, far from the strife

of its past, and somehow be locked away from itself so that it might recover its soul.'

Nawn followed his gaze across the folds of the lower mountains in the growing light. It seemed indeed a place of great peace, but it was all he had known. Then Bron turned back to the water below.

'And yet I speak as though I know these things, while my waking memory tells me that I awoke by your fire, and that all before that was a black dream,' Bron mused to himself.

'Can you remember nothing at all then?' asked Nawn. 'You have told me many things about the Outside that I have never known. Surely you recall some things, however disordered they may be.'

Bron turned and looked at him.

'I remember pain —and faces,' he said after a moment. 'The pain goes with the faces. They float before me sometimes, calling to me —but I am helpless, and I cannot hear what they are trying to tell me. The first is a woman. She looks down at me briefly and then she is gone. She has white hair, but she is not old. She is very beautiful. A gem shines on her brow, but to me her eyes are deeper than its crystal facets. She does not try to speak. I feel that I never really knew her, but something in me yearns for her still.

'Then there is a man, stern, grim, his face in shadow. He tries to speak to me sometimes in my dreams, but I cannot understand him. His voice is drowned in a kind of thunder, and I flee from him, weeping. Then there is the other woman. She is beautiful too, so beautiful that I cannot bear to look at her, for in looking at her I feel so much pain that it is as though I have been pierced with a sword.

'But all of them I have lost. All of them,' he muttered, covering his eyes with his hand.

'Sometimes the Pool has shown me visions,' Nawn said, 'and I too have seen faces and many other things that I have not understood. We are alike, then, in that. But is there nothing else —no other fragment that you can draw from the depths of your memory? Perhaps if you look into the water.'

Bron nodded, wiping at his eyes. He leaned out over the Pool. There was a silence. Birds all around them now began to wake, and the stars began to wink out in the east.

'Something comes to me,' said Bron at last. 'Someone else —perhaps in a tale— looked out over a water like this, seeking themselves. But it was indeed just a tale. I do not know. What faces have you seen in the water?'

Nawn thought.

'Many, over a time,' he said. 'Sometimes they come in a flood, a great rush of people unknown to me, passing across the surface of the Pool, or of my mind, without heeding me: warriors, kings, noble lords of far-off lands, perhaps riding to battles in the distant past. At other times I see glimpses of things that make no sense at all, and I wonder if they were meant for mortal sight. But sometimes I see the face of my father —he says nothing, but looks right into my eyes, as though he knows I look at him. He is very grim. I feel that he bears some burden, but does not wish to yield it to me. I fall to wondering how he lost his eye then —for my father had only his left eye. The other he covered with a black patch.'

Bron had gone suddenly pale before him as he spoke, and Nawn stopped.

'What is it?' he said. Bron's eyes had frozen on some other

scene, distant from the world, and Nawn saw that he was having trouble speaking.

‘The grim-faced man, your father,’ he said at last, ‘he has only one eye, you say?’

Nawn froze, and two things then happened for him in swift succession —a wave of fear like a sudden blizzard passed through him, carrying with it the sensation of being swiftly and abruptly raised out of the mortal world and looking down on it from the clouds, with the eyes of a god; and then he crashed back to the ordinary world, and wondered whether Bron was in fact mad. He had not thought so before —but now he wondered why the thought had not come to him earlier. The stranger was clearly not at peace with himself. Who was to say that he would not simply fall, after a while, into true insanity? Nawn had not seen true madness, but it was said that there had been a miller, up in the north of the Valley, who had gone mad and thrown himself under his mill-wheel years ago. Nawn found himself thinking of this, and realising that he was far from his home, and that Bron, though a little younger than he, had a sword.

These things all raced quickly through Nawn’s mind. Bron had not moved while Nawn stared at him, swallowing his fear. He waited for the stranger to speak again.

Bron turned to the water.

‘One eye!’ he was muttering. ‘One eye! What does it mean? Have I seen him too, in the life I had once? Is there more to our meeting than fortune, then? Is there such a thing as Fortune at all? Oh, gods, would that I could know!’

He cried out a great cry then, and raised his hands to the

sky as though begging the disappearing stars for the knowledge—but time passed by, and the surface of the Pool did not change, and the light grew. Nawn heard his companion suppress weeping. Mad or not, Nawn thought, he is deserving more of pity than fear. He put his hand on Bron's shoulder.

The deep purple of the eastern sky above the snowy peaks turned into a soft pink, then a pale gold. Only in the far west now did the stars still burn. Nawn looked down into the water.

He gasped: the surface of the Pool had changed—it was not flat and grey, but deep and black, as though it had opened into a pit. Light, like a distant beacon, burned at the bottom. He glanced at Bron by his side, and saw that he was seeing it too. He dared not move.

As he watched, the light of the beacon grew like a flame, filling all the darkness until it seemed as though the sun had begun to rise there rather than in the east. They looked down into the light of a sunlit day. Mountains surrounded the scene, but they were not the mountains of the Valley—Nawn knew every peak around his home, and he knew he had never seen this range before.

Then the scene changed. They could see down into a gap in the mountains, and, descending like an eagle towards it, the vision drew near to something that lay at the bottom of that other, steeper valley—it was some kind of stonework. Nawn tried to look closer, but when he moved he felt dizzy, and feared that he would fall from the rock. He steadied himself.

It was a well, old and partly collapsed, but a well

nonetheless. That was all —there was nothing around it, nothing moved in the valley, and no face looked out of the water at them. Nawn shivered. The vision was gone. When he looked about him at the light of the growing morning it was as though he had imagined it all. Pale sunlight now touched the topmost peaks, and the birdsong was loud in the trees. It was like waking from a long dream, he thought, though it had been no more than a moment since they had both looked into the water. But when he looked at Bron he suddenly knew that it had been no dream.

Bron's eyes had changed. Whereas before, light had flickered across them as though they were pools of water themselves, now they were still and deep. He returned Nawn's gaze steadily.

'Now at least I know something,' he said quietly, 'and in knowing something I can begin to be. Did you see as I saw? Did you see the other mountains and the Well standing there?'

Nawn nodded.

'Friend Nawn,' Bron went on, 'it seems that you and I are linked in this tale in some way: not only do you save my life, you share my visions! I do not know why this should be, but it calms my soul. Will you come with me out of this valley? Will you journey with me to the lands that you call Outside?'

Nawn could not speak. He felt dizzy again —his whole world was spinning. He sat down. Bron, not waiting for an answer, went on.

'I do not yet know my name, nor how I came to be here, nor my destiny or place in this world. But some things have managed to touch me where I have hidden myself in my

grief. When you told me of your father, I remembered words: “Look for my face in the waters of Kaela”. And I saw that was why I had to come here; that was why I felt compelled to follow you through the wood. For is this not a pool that Kaela blessed in the beginning of the world? Is it not, as Vorandor’s tale tells, a Seeing Water? Somehow the speaker of those words has reached me, then —he has reached me!

‘Who is that speaker?’ asked Nawn, feeling dangerously close to some abyss again.

Bron laughed —but it was a laugh without the edge of bitterness that Nawn had heard in his voice since they had met.

‘I do not know!’ he said. ‘I still do not know! But those were his words! And with them I find that I live after all! But who am I in truth? And having seen this well in the water — a place I also feel I have seen before— am I to go there? It seems I must. I would that you would come with me, Nawn. I feel as though we are already brothers in some way —as though we were meant to meet.’

‘I do not know,’ said Nawn, his mind still whirling. ‘I do not know what I should do. Perhaps I should look again into the Pool for guidance?’

‘You are fortunate to have had such a guide so far, though its directions are still mysterious,’ Bron said, ‘for I have wandered long in the wilderness without even the knowledge of the places I walked. But that is over now! Come, if it would ease your heart, let us look again in the water! For he bade me look for his face, but I have not seen it; and your path needs to seem clearer before you. Let us trust in Raendu to show us more.’

Nawn nodded, and they bent again to the water. But, though Nawn peered long and hard, he could see nothing but the grey, pale surface, still mostly in shadow. He raised himself up.

‘Nothing,’ said Bron. ‘I saw only your face peering back at me. But is this not a wonder, that you should see such things when you have not journeyed beyond the walls of this valley? And that I should come down the paths from the high places to your door, and no other? I draw great comfort from this, though I know not why.’

They both clambered down from the golden rock, and made to leave the place. But suddenly Bron gripped Nawn’s arm and said:

‘Stay a moment, friend! I would look once more into the water ere we leave. The face of the woman that pierces me like a sword—I would know more of her, if I could. I feel—nay, I know—that she and I shared a great love. Yet I cannot even grasp her name. Let me look!’

He went to the waterside, and, not climbing the rock, looked straight down into the Pool. Nawn waited for him. The sun climbed slowly above the mountains. Bron stood unmoving by the water. After a few moments, Nawn went to him. He was cold and solid.

‘Look!’ he whispered, pointing down at the water. ‘Can you not see him? The Hooded Man!’

Nawn looked down at the Pool again, but saw nothing except the bright sky growing brighter.

‘Bron,’ he said, gripping his friend’s arm, ‘let us leave this place! It was not meant to be guided by our wills, I’m sure of that, but to show us only those things that we are fated to

see. Come away!’

He pulled at Bron, and the stranger tore himself away from the edge of the water with a cry, trembling and breathing hard.

‘Oh, gods,’ he muttered, ‘I do not think I could face him again! Do not make me face him again!’

Nawn dragged his companion further away into the trees, and before the first rays of the sun had touched the surface of the water they had left the Pool behind and were making their way back to the cottage.

The rest of that day they spent in a strange silence. Having seen visions, Nawn thought, the ordinary things of day looked different, somehow hollow, but thin also, as though light of a different world shone through them. He slept for some of the daylight hours, a great weariness overcoming him—but his mind was full of the picture of the Well, and the mystery of it. Part of him wished that Bron would go, and go soon, alone; but part of him wondered at the destiny that had brought the wandering warrior to his door. He remembered the knock that had disturbed him from sleep that winter’s night, and he watched Bron as the man chopped firewood beyond the window; and he remembered his father’s words. Was this Raendu’s sign? He shivered, as though he stood on the edge of a cliff and stepped out into the air.

Spring had found a firm foothold, however, before Bron decided that it was time to leave.

Along with the silence that sprang from their shyness with each other, a reluctance had seized him after seeing the

image of the Hooded Man in the water. It was long before Nawn could find out exactly what his companion had seen —Bron's face would turn to cold ash at the mention of it— but gradually he coaxed it from him: a tall, hooded figure had stood there, waiting for him, beckoning to him. But now Bron had made a decision to leave the next morning —Nawn had not yet made up his own mind. A large pack stood ready by the door as they sat by a fire inside —it was a cold night, and a chill and rainy wind blew down from the mountains to the north.

'It is like a man,' Bron said slowly, 'dressed all in black. He calls to me from a great distance, but his voice is as a whisper in my mind. I do not know what he says —perhaps it is my name. Then he comes, striding out of the mist with a pale sword like a grey firebrand. He has no face, Nawn, no face — just a black void under his hood. Terror colder than the earth itself seems to pour from him into me. And, flowing from me to him, is all that I have, all that I am: he draws life from me, and takes all that I love, and I am helpless before him. Then everything goes dark, and I remember no more. So it has been in my dreams, and so it was in the Pool.'

The fire crackled suddenly, startling Nawn.

'And you have no memory of this creature?' he said. 'No waking memory, so that you might know whether it is the shadow of someone living, or a phantom of dreams only?'

Bron slowly shook his head, staring into the flames.

'Since we visited the Pool,' he said, 'I can see more of my past — but not much more. I will tell you the extent of it. There is the face of the bejewelled woman, the one who leaves me; there is the man in shadow, calling to me from

behind a great smoke and thunder, bidding me look for him in the enchanted waters —I cannot see his face; there is the other woman, the beautiful one, the one I think I loved — sometimes it seems she looks on me with scorn; and then there is the Hooded Man. But there is also the Well. I have seen that before, certainly. That is the place I must find —but the Well is not the end of my road, I feel.’

Nawn stared into the fire, and a silence fell. His life, he felt, had suddenly woken up, but was now again on the edge of sleep. He welcomed that, he thought —he wanted no part of shadows or Hooded Men. But he would miss Bron. Perhaps he had served his purpose, though, and done his duty to Raendu, by showing this young warrior Kaela’s water. Now Bron would go on to great deeds and song, and Nawn would return to his ordinary life, the great task of his life done.

But even as the thought completed itself in his mind he saw that it could not be so. The depths of the fire now burned bright red, and he gazed into their hollow kingdoms of flame. Somewhere out there, he felt, a great darkness waited for him to walk into it. He did not know where or how, or what it meant: all he knew was that it waited for him. He was free not to walk into it —but if he did not, the mystery of what lay in its impenetrable shadows would haunt him all his life. He closed his mind: he would not go! Let it haunt him! He would defy it, and remain safe, and stay in the sheltered Valley. Darkness was for others —he had neither created nor sanctioned it.

But the decision at once irked him. He shifted restlessly in his chair. Bron did not move or speak, lost in his own

thoughts.

‘Take me with you,’ said Nawn suddenly, surprised to hear his own voice saying the words. ‘Take me out of the Valley. Take me to the Well!’

Bron looked at him.

‘Certainly,’ he said, smiling, after a moment. ‘But then? After the Well? It will be a hard enough road to reach that place, I doubt not, but after that I cannot say where we must go. It is very possible you will not return to the Valley.’

‘All roads lead to death in the end,’ Nawn said, ‘and there is nothing for me here —no family, no one that will even know that I am gone, save perhaps Alween, and she will soon find another. I am no more than a stranger to her, though I love her dearly. Despite that love, I must leave the Valley —I must climb the Shining Stair, and look upon the Outside! I must breathe the wild air that blows across the wide world!’

Bron smiled again.

‘I cannot deny you, nor command you,’ he said, ‘but I can welcome you! And you are welcome, my brother in dreams. We were indeed fated to meet, I feel. But if you are coming with me, then we must now sleep, for I leave with the dawn. I can wait no longer —something tells me that I must reach this Well before the summer begins, but that it is a long journey. You will need your own pack.’

‘That is not a long matter,’ Nawn said, and set about preparing his own provisions,

Nawn left the Valley the next day, and at first it seemed to him that no journey that he could walk with his feet could

change his life in the way he felt it must change. But, as the dawn changed to day, and the path wound on past the point that anyone in the Valley had walked it, past the overgrown slopes and crumbled rocks, past the edge of all living knowledge—the same path that Vorandor must have taken, that his father had taken—he saw that it was so: his own feet were taking him Outside, towards the Darkness at last, and perhaps beyond.

He looked back in the late morning, back and down, for they had risen quite high at that point, and all his world lay spread beneath—the crossing pattern of the small farms, the streams and small lakes, the green woods and fields where Farndonath grew wild like fire. All about him was the grand silence of the peaks. He turned away, and dared not wonder whether he would ever look down on his home again.

They came by evening to the Shining Stair, which Nawn now saw was a huge waterfall in which one of the rivers of the Valley plummeted for thousands of feet from the ice above to the green fields below. It glimmered and shone like a cataract of blood in the glow of the sunset, and they climbed up its face by a path that appeared part-carven, part-natural. Nawn saw why some had later called it the Wraith Stairs—great mists of fine water rose up continually around it, drenching any who went near, dancing like giant phantoms about the cliffs. Before true night fell, though, they were at the top, and the Valley looked incredibly small to Nawn's eyes as he looked down into it under the stars. He could see no lights, nor any sign that living folk dwelt there. Mists gathered in the valley basin. The tops of the mountains all about him now seemed very close, almost as though he

could reach out and touch them. Even the stars seemed nearer.

They made camp at the top of the falls for the night, and the roar of the thawed water surging over that mighty cliff drove all anxiety from Nawn's mind with its force. When he awoke the next morning he felt stiff and sore, but they immediately went on, still winding upwards, leaving the banks of the river and heading for a gap in the teeth of stone ahead.

Bron had no clear idea of his way, but was trusting to his instinct and the vague shadow-memories of his descent. It seemed good enough —by the end of the second day they were in a high pass, surrounded by cold, forbidding stone, a landscape in which nothing grew, but through which they could walk, and beyond which they could glimpse the sky on the other side of the mountains. Unmelted snow, beyond the reach of any summer, still gathered here in the shadows, and it was bitterly cold even during the daylight hours, but they did not remain in the pass for long. The way began to descend very steeply, and by the end of the third day they knew that they had crossed the mountains, even though they had had as yet no glimpse of the lands beyond.

This came on the fourth day since they had left. They rounded a great ridge of rock which had barred their way for hours, and the sun shone out from behind clouds onto a world full of air and emptiness. Nawn strained his eyes, looking for the mountains around the edge of things, but they were not there. They looked out south across dim, green lands that stretched to the horizon, marked with forests and streams as far as the eye could see. Westward a great dark

mass signified an immense wilderness of trees which spanned that whole side of the world; eastward the mountains tumbled away, forming a wall to the north. Nawn breathed in deeply.

‘So you taste wild air from the wide lands!’ Bron said, smiling. ‘Would that I could name the lands you see! But perhaps they are better left unnamed, as they were in the Beginning of the World. It is a sight, is it not?’

Nawn nodded, his own breath taken away by the wind, which blew chill and fresh now from the west, racing up the slope towards them across the blank stone.

With some difficulty they climbed down from that high place, needing ropes at several points to descend sheer faces of stone. Nawn was no stranger to climbing, but here all dimensions seemed new and vast and his blood ran hot and then cold as they negotiated their way eventually to a lower plateau where the first trees grew. Here they camped again. Clouds that had swept by below them now blocked out the sun above, and Nawn felt that he had truly entered the world beyond the Valley. He was not sure that he liked it.

They gradually left the world of stone and snow behind and came to the greener spring world of budding trees and grass. Nawn saw mountain goats leaping from slope to slope as they descended, and heard the song of many birds. Bright flowers grew in clusters by the path, blue, red, and white — but he could see no golden Farndonath, and with that thought came his first twinge of longing for the Valley — Farndonath, he knew, was a great protection against evils of all kinds, even Dragons. He felt very unprotected out here.

He had also left behind his other chief comfort, the Pool.

He felt alone and without a guide, for while he had the Pool he had felt as though his father was still in some sense with him —now he walked alone, and would have to find his own direction. If his father called to him, would he hear the voice?

At first, though, it was not so hard. Nothing but the usual hardships of living outdoors were demanded from him, and the sun shone, and the woods were full of spring life —the breezes were warm, as though summer had come early, and the waters of the various streams they crossed or walked beside were sweet and fresh. Bron hunted game, revealing his skill as an archer, and Nawn prepared and cooked the food, and convinced himself that this journey was a light matter, an adventure only, and that he could and would soon return to his home. They went on, reaching a steep and rolling country of folding valleys at the mountains' feet, full of small waterfalls, ravines, deep pools of blue water and rushing rivers.

One afternoon, about a week after they had set out, they came to a wide meadow. The country had begun to even out, and woods grew here and there more thickly. They had not yet come upon any other living thing except for the beasts and birds of the forests or grassy slopes, but Bron had become anxious as the weather grew warmer, feeling an urgency which Nawn did not feel, and sometimes drawing his sword for no visible reason. That day was particularly warm, and as they walked they grew thirsty. The river which ran through the heart of the meadow was choked with rich green grasses and weeds, but soon Nawn heard the tinkle of another stream coming down the hillside to meet it. They made their way towards it.

‘What do you know of this land?’ Nawn asked as they drank from it. The water tasted strangely sweet, Nawn thought.

‘Nothing distinct,’ Bron said, ‘but I feel an unease, as though eyes were upon us from these woods. Let us rest here a while, and keep watch!’

They sat down by the stream, bathing their faces. It was almost noon. Bees droned about the large flowers, and white clouds slid by slowly to the west.

‘Is this a land of men, then?’ asked Nawn, feeling suddenly sleepy.

‘I do not know,’ answered Bron. ‘I have not yet seen any sign of men. I had hoped to find a friendly land soon —I have some dim memory that to the south men live in peace. But no one seems to dwell near this meadow.’ He yawned.

Nawn yawned after him. The buzz of the bees, the musical trickle of the stream, and their tiredness combined in a general drowsiness. Nawn felt his eyes growing heavy. He drifted on the edge of a dream. Bron, at his side, fell asleep.

In the half-dream that Nawn was watching unfold before him, strange figures seemed to grow from the meadow-grass and amble towards them. They were like men, but shorter and bent over, with large eyes, as though they had lived long in a confined darkness. They came quite close, but very slowly and cautiously. Then they picked up Bron between four of them and carried him away. Nawn felt bony hands gripping him, too —he did not resist. His arms seemed heavy, and it was easier to rest and simply watch. They were half-lifted, half-dragged up the meadow and under trees, coming near to the face of a great rocky hillside. A dark door

opened there, and Nawn found himself taken within, but then he lost all understanding of what was happening, and slept very deeply for what seemed a long time.

When he awoke, he was in darkness. Cold stone dug into his back, and his head felt heavy. With a shock, he realised that the water of the stream had been poisoned or enchanted in some way, and that they had fallen prey to an enemy. What kind of enemy, he did not know —if the images from his half-dream were true, then they were some kind of misshapen men with pale skin and bony hands. Old tales, even in the Valley, had spoken of Shadowed Men —he wondered if these were some kind of half-breed of that folk. He wondered also how they lived there, where scarcely any travellers came, and from what race had they descended. He felt very stiff. In the darkness he could not see Bron, but slowly a firelight grew ahead and he could make out his surroundings.

He was in a large cavern, its dark roof twenty feet above. Bron lay next to him, still asleep as far as he could tell. Towards the centre of the cavern there was movement about the fire. Nawn looked, cautiously, and his blood froze —thirty or forty of the creatures of his dream were gathering around the flames, their thin forms casting spindly shadows on the walls all about him. He looked around again —they had not, it seemed, touched their captives much as yet: the packs were still intact, as were all their clothes. But as he listened, Nawn heard a dreadful sound from somewhere in the whispering blackness of that cave: the sharpening of a knife on stone. He wondered fleetingly to what evil purpose

that blade would be put, and how these creatures lived in the wild, and on what things they fed. Perhaps, though travellers like he and Bron were rare, they were viewed as a feast. He sickened, but was careful not to stir. The creatures were twenty or more feet away, but any sound would echo in that awful place.

Cold sweat ran on his brow. Bron was still asleep. Soon they would consider their knives sharp enough. He wondered how long he had already been lying there. He stared desperately into the darkness. He had not been bound—whether his captors thought their water-spell strong enough, or whether they knew escape was hopeless anyway, he did not know—but the lack of bonds gave him a sudden hope. Very carefully he twisted so as to better see around him. They were lying near the wall of the cave. But there was little else in the place that could be of any use. If only Bron were awake!

Then Nawn's eye fell on the sword at his companion's side. If there were any hope of waking him, Nawn realised, that would be it—Bron guarded that sword with his life, and had even clutched it to him in his near-death in the snow. Any attempt to wrest it from him would surely stir him. But what then? Nawn did not know how many of these creatures there were, nor what weapons they possessed. Even if Bron were to awake, and swiftly enough, they might be dead before he even realised where he was. He might even slay Nawn himself in the darkness.

All these thoughts raged through Nawn's mind in a moment. Beside them was the steady fact that there was little else to be done. Any moment they might be killed—it was

better, he thought, to act and hope than not to act and have neither life nor hope. He shuffled nearer to Bron's sleeping form. So full of fear that he almost cried out, he reached over and grasped the hilt of the golden sword violently.

Several things then happened at once: the gathering of creatures around the fire let out a collective cry as they perceived his movement; there was a great rush of sound as their feet moved on the floor; Nawn yelled out words he did not know and could not later remember, speaking from panic; and Bron stirred.

The young warrior sat up suddenly, tearing Nawn's hands from his sword-hilt. In a rage of half-sleep, he then stood, just as the leading figures of the crowd of stooped creatures drew near, wailing loudly. Bron struck these leaders dead with two swift blows, and the rest fell back, snarling. Nawn saw knives glitter dimly in their hands in the firelight—he had no doubt how sharp they were.

'Nawn!' shouted Bron. 'Where are you? Where is this place?'

'I'm here!' answered Nawn. 'We are held captive by these folk, under the hills.'

'So! And I guess their water was sweetened with something evil!' Bron said, and he began to swing his sword about him, advancing steadily. As the firelight took up the moving blade, it glimmered in endless flashes around that cavern, and the creatures fell back.

'What art thou?' cried Bron, in the High Tongue. 'Speak! Where art thou from, and what manner of creature art thou?'

The spindly men did not answer except in their own incomprehensible tongue, to each other. They seemed to

gather their courage with numbers, and began to slowly advance. But, in the growing light from the fire, and the golden light which reflected in Bron's blade, he could see them well enough, and two more lay slain before they reached him.

'Speak!' he said again, still advancing until he reached the fire and stood with his back to it, Nawn at his side. 'Which one of ye speaks for the rest?'

They had drawn back. Bron was too tall and swift for them, and they were not used to quarry that broke free or fought back. A wizened little figure stepped forward into the light with a raised hand. Bron lowered his sword slightly.

'Wait!' croaked the old creature. 'Wait! Put up thy sword! We do not desire to be slain.'

'Then tell me who thou art, and why ye waylaid my companion and myself, who have done ye no knowing harm?' Bron demanded.

'We have no name any longer as a people,' came the answer, 'but I am called Gogaver, and am the eldest.'

'And why have we been made captive?' Bron asked again.

'For no evil of thine,' said Gogaver, his voice like rasping ash, and his use of words like one who had not spoken that tongue for an age, 'but for the needs of a people that has descended far from the light of the sun. We feed on any that drink of the water of the meadow: the Place of the Sleeping Flower it is called, and Yagoro-vogatar, the Source of Blood. Long have we watched ye come down from the high places; long have we watched this road.'

Nawn felt suddenly ill, and he and Bron looked palely at each other in the firelight, as they thought of the fate that had

awaited them.

‘But now thou must release us,’ Bron said, ‘or my sword shall take upon itself the task of vengeance for all whom ye have waylaid. Beware the Golden Blade! It is sharp and swift, as thy people have seen to their peril!’

Gogaver bowed awkwardly.

‘We have no desire for further death,’ he croaked, ‘but these lands are our lands, and all folk must find a way to live.’

‘Very well,’ Bron answered. ‘That these are thy lands I may grant—but that thy people are bound to live worse than beasts I would deny. Ye are not Shadowed Men, for ye speak words, while they are silent. What curse lies upon ye, that ye have not moved on to better lands and lives? How long has thy race lived thus?’

Gogaver paused, looking on Bron with eyes that shone red in that light and made Nawn’s flesh quiver.

‘When the fathers of my fathers served the Great Queen, and when the northern lands were ruled by snow, then were we sent here, to wait in watchfulness for the people of the North, should they appear again from the hills. And our lord, who was shamed before their King, cursed us, and made us swear an oath to leave him not, neither in life nor death, and when others were disloyal, the people of the hills remained true, and dwelt here still. So speaks Gogaver!’

A murmur like a mournful wail went about the dark hall at this. Nawn looked about him. Hostile and fearful eyes surrounded them in the blackness.

‘Then thou served the Enchantress, who brought the Great Winter down on Gandria?’ said Bron, astonished. ‘And when

Vorandor fled with his people, and Solveer thy lord was shamed before his men, thou served him yet, and keep thine oath even now, after a thousand years?’

Gogaver bowed again.

‘We speak not the names,’ he said, ‘but it is so.’

‘Then Gogaver, I pity thee. And were it within my power, I would release thee from thy long servitude. The Enchantress has long departed from this world; and Solveer is dead. An age has passed thee by. Thy people have fallen further in their obedience to evil than any people need fall. Release us, and in time thou also may be shown mercy. For does not the tale tell of hope of release also?’

Silence, broken only by the bitter crackle of the fire, fell in the chamber. Nawn and Bron stood close to one another — Nawn had picked up a knife from one of the fallen men and held it tightly. He wondered desperately what would happen, certain that if the creatures decided to attack they would triumph by strength of numbers alone. Fear and horror vied for control of his thoughts.

Then Gogaver bowed again and raised his thin hand, calling out strange words.

Many shapes shuffled off into the darkness. Torches were brought. Bron and Nawn were led up a steep passage, with Gogaver before them. Suddenly, Nawn was blinking and shivering in the twilight of a cold evening. They had escaped.

THE FIELDS OF SHAND

*Song of splendour, shown in a shape so
Glorious, green with glades and gleaming
Streams silver in the sunlight, shining
With the wonder of Raendu's Star,
There lay Shand, the greatest of kingdoms,
Waiting for one who would walk to the Throne.*

-from The Song of Sundergost

Gogaver and his companions looked shrunken and unmenacing in the shadowy light at the end of the day. A thin, early moonlight washed over the hillside where trees stood waiting in a breathless silence. Stars were beginning to wink in the sky. Nawn listened as Bron spoke:

'Listen to me, Gogaver,' he said. 'I know not if ever I will have the authority to do that which I wish I could do for thy people, but I say by this sword which I carry that if ever I should come to such authority I will return to release ye all from thy foul oath which has trapped ye into such a miserable life. In return for the release I hope to grant ye, thy people must move on and forget the evil ways into which they have fallen.'

Gogaver shivered in the pale light. Nawn wondered if he ever emerged from the dark warrens within the hillside—his eyes seemed large and deep, as though darkness slept in them. Bron lifted the golden sword, and held it out, hilt upward.

'Gogaver has not seen a sword like this in his lifetime,' the

old man said. 'Such things are forgotten even in our people's tales, which now are few, and dark. Fear of its cutting edge yielded thee to the light —few of our prey fight back, and much sorrow has this sword brought us this day— but as the eldest of his people Gogaver says this: Go and fulfil thine oaths and return with our release! For Gogaver's old eyes see deep into dark places, even into the souls that are dark, and he sees that such a thing might indeed come to be, as the old tales foretold. One greater than he whom we do not name would come, they said. Perhaps he has come. But do not tarry in these woods. Go south, over the rivers —there many men such as thee still dwell, under the shadow of these mountains. Do not return here unless thou bring freedom, for the mercy of Gogaver is a precious thing and will not be given twice.'

Without saying anything further, the shrunken figure turned, and, with his companions, he vanished into the hillside as swiftly as if he had been a shadow cast by the moon. Nawn and Bron looked at each other —it was almost as though the whole thing, from the moment they had rested by the stream earlier that day, had been a dark dream. They hurried down the hillside, and walked quickly for some miles, without looking back, wading across the river and through many marshy meadows before resting.

With the sunrise they looked back at the foothills of the Penning, and, behind them, at the great looming mass of the mountains themselves, ridge upon ridge of stone, leaping upward to snowy peaks in the early light.

'Now we know another reason why your home has remained hidden from the world,' Bron said. 'Not only the

mountains have blocked the road —there has been a horror guarding the way in, and out.'

Nawn shivered as he thought what might have happened if he had decided to journey out into the world alone —it had been Bron's sword that the strange creatures had been afraid of. He did not even carry a weapon. Then he remembered the slender knife he had picked up in the cave. He had placed it in his belt without thinking. He looked closely at it now. Bron took it from him and held it up in the sunlight that now reached down to them from the east.

'It is an old blade,' he said. 'If Gogaver spoke the truth, and his people have watched this road since Vorandor led the folk of the Enchanted Kingdoms along it, then this knife could be over a thousand years old. But it has had an evil past!'

And, so saying, he threw the blade away until struck a tree far away and remained embedded in the wood.

'There let it remain,' he said, 'and may all good creatures avoid this place by its warning until we can come again with release! Now, come, we must rest. We have journeyed far, and you have had a dark introduction to the world beyond your valley's walls. Not all Outsiders live thus! I will watch while you sleep. We shall journey for a while by night, until we see the lie of the land, and know whether we are likely to meet friend or foe.'

Then Bron cleaned the sword he had carried all the way from the cave, and Nawn fell asleep on a patch of thick grass. Though he had some restless dreams, for the most part he slept deeply, wondering in a dim, half-waking way why his bed had suddenly become so large and so hard, and what

had happened to his ceiling.

They journeyed on in this fashion, travelling mainly by night, for two more days before anything further happened. The weather had stayed warm, and the spring sun drew out the life and motion in the things around them as they went: trees reached upward with new fingers, birds rejoiced in their leaves, and beasts moved in the undergrowth. The land had flattened out into rolling river-meadows that whispered with newly-opened flowers. They had met no one, however, until, one morning as they were looking for a camping place, and as Nawn was beginning to long for a proper bed in which to sleep, they came upon a road.

It wound from east to west, and was no more than a track, perhaps leading to a farm nearby, but, as the first true sign of people that Nawn had seen beyond the mountains, it startled him and he became very wary. Bron pulled his cloak, now dark and travel-stained, close around him, keeping his sword hidden and pulling his hood down over his face.

'I know not if either my face or my sword will be recognised,' he said, 'and, as we may now meet someone as we go, I would not be openly seen lest someone know me before I know myself!'

Nawn nodded, and pulled his own cloak tighter, hoisting his pack firmly onto his shoulders as they went on a little way further. They camped and rested that day and most of that night, Bron deciding that they must now travel on in daylight so that they could be part of the world of mortals. He had had a change of heart.

'We do not know what awaits us,' he said. 'You have never

seen it, and I have forgotten it. It is useless to be afraid, then, as I confess I was yesterday. Though I will still go cloaked and hooded, we should not shrink from whatever awaits us. We should do as well to walk openly and proclaim ourselves travellers from a distant land in the North as be found skulking around the places of men in the dark like vagabonds.'

Nawn felt, in fact, that his companion was becoming eager to find company and have questions answered —the thaw of the surrounding lands had to some degree been mirrored in Bron's heart, he thought, and some of the darkness had lifted. Perhaps also in Gogaver's people he had seen something darker than himself.

But they met no one on that road the next day, walking east. The land opened out around them into a green, settled country —stone walls and grazing cattle began to appear on the hillsides, and streams were bridged by stepping stones, carefully laid, or logs cut to fit across them. Smoke rose in the east from an unseen chimney. Whatever this land was, Nawn thought, it seemed at peace —but in his mind it was too large a place: he found that he was continually looking for the mountains which he believed should have risen on either side of the world, and he wondered at the size of the Outside. Surely they would come to its edge soon? He had never travelled so far, and part of him felt wary of it —so many miles without any dwelling of men seemed to him to be impossible. Did men gather together in townships, as in the Valley, or did they all hide in the woods and hills like Gogaver and his people? And how could they bear to be so exposed to the light and the wind of the plains? He had not

realised how much comfort he had drawn from the surrounding peaks of his home.

The following morning, as they reached the top of a slow climbing rise in the land, with fields newly ploughed on either side, they looked down on a small settlement at last, a village, clustered around the crest of the next hill. It was surrounded by new green fields, and a welcoming smoke rose from a large chimney in its centre. A rider could be seen making his slow way down a lane in the distance, heading the same way as them, perhaps a farmer or merchant come to do business in the village. The sight of an Outsider other than Bron or the hill-people fascinated Nawn, not least because this newcomer seemed perfectly ordinary —apart from a few hardly noticeable differences in dress, he might have been from the Valley.

As they watched, a woman came out of one of the houses and walked up another lane. Bron waited for a while, but then seemed content —the place appeared peaceful enough. They walked on slowly, being half-eager and half-wary to approach the buildings, to meet others, to be caught up in the life around them.

In the centre of the village was a tavern, its upper floors teetering on its lower. It was the largest building in the village, being three storeys high and extending back some way from the lane. Less than a handful of other cottages flocked around it like large squarish sheep, almost leaning on it, Nawn thought. He noticed the sign that hung from its front porch: 'The Fields of Shand', it said, though the letters were slightly strange to him, painted in green and gold.

'Shand,' muttered Bron. 'There is a name on the edge of

the twilight that dwells in my mind, like a name in a dream. The Fields of Shand. Perhaps I dwelt here once —perhaps this village is my home. Who knows? No doubt some worthy within will enlighten me! Come, friend Nawn, let us take our lives and our courage and step within!

Nawn followed him over the threshold.

A woman tended a smouldering fire in a large fireplace. She glanced up at them and returned to her work. After a moment, laying down the poker with which she had stirred the embers into new life, she approached them.

‘Greetings,’ she said. ‘How might I help you, travellers?’

Bron looked around from under his hood. The rider they had seen had beaten them there and was drinking from a tankard near the fire. He looked at them silently. No one else was in the room.

‘Fair hostess,’ began Bron, but as he spoke a large man had entered from somewhere towards the back of the tavern and stood glowering at them from a little distance.

‘Stranger,’ he interrupted in a deep voice, ‘I do not wish to be ungracious, but these are troubled times. I must ask your business in these parts. And that of your young friend. Are you here to serve Balar or do you wait upon the king?’

Nawn watched as Bron thought quickly. The large man, his hair thick and tangled, looked strong and hard, but not evil, Nawn thought —it was more as though he were weary, and cautious.

‘I do not know the name Balar,’ Bron said carefully. ‘We are new to this land, having descended into it from the North. Insofar as your king is a good and gracious lord, then I wait upon him.’

The man smiled, and the effect was like the sun emerging from a stormcloud, Nawn thought.

‘A good answer, and an honest one, I think,’ he said, ‘though few come from the North. They say the Old Lands are empty and frozen now, and that the mountains are impassable. What is your business here, and what are you called?’

Bron looked the man in the eye from under his hood.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘in the lands that I remember, it is the duty of the host to first announce himself —or so I thought. Is it not so in this kingdom?’

The man gave a little laugh.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘it is so! But this land has long been a kingdom without a king, and a kingdom at war —and though the hosts of the enemy are driven for the most part from these fields, there still remain enough evil-doers about for men like me to be cautious of hooded strangers. Who are you, Hooded Man? And why have you come to Remskillieth in Miria, northernmost land of the Four Kingdoms of Shand?’

Nawn saw Bron reel with the name the inn-keeper had given him —his black hood, it seemed, had earned him the name of the shadow he had seen in the Pool. But his companion soon steadied himself and replied:

‘I come to Miria with no name, though I may take the name you give me. And I come out of great peril and anguish in the North, seeking comfort and aid. If I cannot find it here, I will be gone.’

And he bowed a little and made to withdraw, but the inn-keeper raised his hand.

‘Stay, stranger,’ he said, ‘we do not mean to be so discourteous—but if the North has suffered anguish it is not alone. My name is Bartold, and seventeen days ago my son Beretald perished at the hands of Balar the Giant in the Woodland Waste south of here. With such doings in Miria, a man must be cautious in choosing his guests.’

Bron bowed again.

‘I see,’ he said, ‘and nor did I mean any discourtesy. But my companion and I are very weary from the road. I have come through darkness and we have both evaded a death of great horror in the mountains. It would be well if, comforted, we could speak freely to one another. I have some coin with which to pay for food and lodging.’

‘Then let my wife attend to you,’ said Bartold, nodding to the women who had roused the fire, ‘and then we may speak. But do you truly have no names?’

Bron turned to Nawn.

‘This is Nawn Woodwarden, who comes from a hidden land forgotten to song-makers,’ he said. ‘I in truth have passed under a horror so great and dark that the sunlight no longer reaches my name. But the name that you gave me, though it contains the shadow of that fear from which I flee, I will take. You may call me the Man in the Hood, Bron, the Dead One.’

Bartold looked at him intently then, but not with coldness.

‘The new day brings wonders, it seems,’ he said, half to himself and half to them. ‘Let us see what the evening yields.’

That day and evening Nawn learned much of events in the

world Outside. They bathed and rested in comfort, and ate well, and put on fresh clothes, before they sat around the fire, now strongly blazing, with Bartold and a dozen others, farmers and villagers who had hurried to the tavern once the news had spread of strangers there.

Bron sat in the firelight, still wearing his dark cloak with his hood over his brow, as though to fill out the name that had spread around the countryside: 'The Hooded Man has come!' they had said, and they gathered close around the fire to hear Bartold tell him the news. The words obviously meant something different to them than they had to Bron when he had seen the hooded face in the Pool, but Nawn was not now sure what changes had occurred in Bron's mind: he thought his friend was perhaps relishing in some way the theft of his enemy's name. Certainly, as Bron sat there, the red light flickering on the golden hilt that glinted from beneath his cloak, he seemed stronger and more confident than he had so far on their journey. Nawn found himself wondering, for the first time since he had left the Valley, who Bron really was, and how they would find out his true name. It had become Nawn's quest, too, he noted. He did not resist the idea, though he wondered what his part would be.

Bartold spoke of the recent wars, and how all of southern Shand, which was a wide land of men, had been overrun by the hosts of the enemy —warriors called Reavers from the Dark Isles in the east, Turgalin armies from the vast realms beyond the distant southern mountains, and, worst of all, Shadowed Men, evil Carthogs from the dark places of the world. Bands of these warriors, finding gaps in the defences, had roamed far and wide across Shand, ravaging the

countryside. But in the end, they said, the High King had come, with his future queen, and driven out the greater part of the enemy. Neither Bartold, nor anyone there, had seen any of this themselves, but tales and rumours had travelled fast, and they had certainly noticed that the roads and woods had become less dangerous.

But then, the rumours said, things had gone wrong again—the High King had ridden off alone with his lady in the autumn, and had not returned. A great gathering of lords and kings was due in the Shandhall, far to the south, where it would be decided what to do. Locally, though, there was not much interest in that—what troubled the farmers and merchants who lived around Remskillieth was that a band of the enemy’s warriors had remained in the district, burning, raiding and occasionally killing. No one was safe—the sword-worthy men who could be spared had gone south to join the High King and now waited upon the word of the lords of the realm. No one remaining had the strength, and few had the courage, to stand against Balar, the huge leader of the marauders.

Beretald, Bartold’s son, had been one who had the spirit, but not the skill in arms. Balar was arrogant and proud, and would accept challenges of single combat against any who would come forth against him. In that way, Nawn thought, the Turgalin maintained his grip on his own men while killing off any challengers. Beretald had stood against him, but in a short and bloody conflict, had been cruelly killed. He had been the last of the able-bodied young men of the area.

‘Since then,’ said Bartold, ‘between weeping and cursing, and practising with my axe, I have prayed to Raendu to send

me the answer to my wish for vengeance —whether that be my own hand, or the hand of another, I know not. But vengeance there must be, for Beretald and for all who have been lost.'

A mutter of agreement passed through the room. Nawn saw them glancing at Bron as though they expected something from their newcomer. Bron stared into the fire and did not speak for a long while.

When he did begin to say something, it was in a whisper so low that Nawn hardly heard it above the crackle of the logs in the grate.

'The High King and his Queen,' he said, his eyes red with the fire, 'the High King and his Queen. Why do your words fill me with such dread and wonder? It is as though fingers pulled at my burial shroud —my dead soul is being tugged back into the daylight from the dark crypt it has made its home. These lands and folk of which you speak —I feel I know them! And yet their names elude me, as though all life dances around me, laughing and escaping my grasp. I do not know what is to happen next.'

'You say you come from the North,' said a voice —Nawn recognised the face of the rider they had seen arrive at the tavern that morning. He was a wandering trader who travelled the area and brought the most part of the news to Remskillieth. 'Do they have warriors there? Can they help us?'

Bron looked up from the fire.

'No,' he said, 'no, there are no real warriors there. I cannot say how this giant can be brought down.'

'Do you not wear a sword, though?' said the trader,

seeming to speak, Nawn thought, for many of them, from the way in which he noticed their silent interest in his words and the way they looked eagerly at Bron for an answer.

Bron looked down at his sword, and brought it out from under his cloak. It looked very long and bright in its scabbard. After a moment, he unsheathed it. Flames glinted in its golden length —it was smooth and clean and glowed with a fire of its own, Nawn thought, as his friend held it, turning it over in his hands. A great awed hush had descended on the tavern —they had never seen a blade like it before.

‘What sword is this?’ said the trader.

‘I do not know its name,’ replied Bron, slowly, ‘as I do not know my own. It seems as though it were a part of me.’

‘I say it should be called Balar’s Bane!’ the trader said, and a strong murmur supported him. Bron turned suddenly to the room, standing up.

‘Would you have me be your champion?’ he said. ‘I am not of this village, but I am not unwilling. Perhaps I have looked on enough death. One more soul will not matter. Yet perhaps I would be a harder taskmaster than this Balar, were I your king.’

Nawn thought he spoke as though he were in a trance. He grew suddenly afraid, seeing the fear in those gathered there —he touched Bron’s arm. His friend looked at him, and trembled, waking a little, his spirit melting.

‘And yet,’ he said to Nawn alone, ‘if I am to do this deed, I will need a Sword-bearer. Will you be the Bearer of the Golden Blade?’

A thousand thoughts flashed through Nawn’s mind, a

thousand ways of denying this request, which froze his blood—but within a moment he had answered:

‘Aye,’ he said, nodding, ‘aye, I will.’

Before sunset the next day all of Remskillieth and the other villages for miles around knew of the new challenger to the tyranny of Balar, and hundreds of people had gathered at the tavern to try and catch a glimpse of the Man in the Hood whom they believed had come to deliver them. There had been other challengers they all knew, but that did not put out the fire of hope and rumour that raged about the countryside.

A message was sent out by rider, with the assistance of Bartold and the trader, whose name was Amrath. On the edge of the Woodland Waste, five miles south of Remskillieth, a herald read out the proclamation of the challenge, sensing the eyes and ears in the trees—at dawn the following day, Bron and his sword-bearer would arrive to fight with the Turgalin. No spoken answer was given, but the messenger fled knowing that his words had been heeded, for an arrow had flown out of the forest and narrowly missed his horse.

So Nawn came to the edge of that wild place, riding on a much larger horse than any he had ridden in the Valley, through green farmlands and gathering storm—black clouds were looming above the treetops all that day and evening, and as the night before the battle fell, great drops of rain spattered his cloak.

He was not as afraid as he had expected to be—he found that he was more concerned than afraid. He was not sure

what was passing through Bron's mind. His companion had not spoken much since the gathering in Remskillieth, and had grown grim and thoughtful—he often fingered the golden hilt at his side, staring into another world before his eyes. Something was driving him to this, Nawn knew, and guessed that the great unknown in Bron's heart was compelling him to action where knowledge might have counselled otherwise. And yet Bron did not seem fey or possessed: he gathered what information he could about Balar, his size, strength, techniques, anything that was known about his opponent, and he thought coolly about the contest to come, preparing himself carefully with food, drink and rest for the combat. This was not a deed stemming from folly, then, Nawn thought, but part of something his friend felt he had to do—perhaps through this he hoped to discover more about himself in some way.

The facts about Balar, though, were not encouraging: the Turgalin was apparently seven feet tall, broad-shouldered and battle-scarred, wielding a huge broadsword and a war-axe, his black hair braided and brass rings in his ears. He was a cruel and strong fighter, swift for his size, and merciless, with prowess as both a swordsman and wielder of the axe. But he had some weaknesses—since coming to the Woodland Waste he had grown heavy with his spoils, being waited upon by the band of outlaws that were with him, and he had taken to the stolen wines and rich Restonian brandies that their raiding parties had brought to him in abundance. Thus he was perhaps duller than he might have been—but to Nawn, for whom Bron and the other men he had seen were already giants compared to the folk of the Valley, seven

feet was an overwhelming height and would prove the deciding factor, he thought, whether the Turgalin was drunk or not.

Nawn wished that dawn would both hurry on, and never arrive. In the end, the sun came up behind clouds, almost unnoticed in the grey, drizzly day. He and the dozen or so others who had ridden with them, Amrath and Bartold with them, looked out from the shelter of some trees across a pale field which marked the beginning of the Woodland Waste, where other challengers had come. Nothing stirred in the misty morning at first, then Nawn saw two warriors dash from the trees opposite and plant a spear in the middle of the clearing. From it hung some kind of pennant —Balar's sign, no doubt, thought Nawn, though the rain dripped from it and the colours could not be seen.

Time had not given him chance for speech with Bron before he saw his friend girding himself and preparing to walk out into the rain. He went to his side.

Bron turned to him.

'So, Sword-bearer,' he said, 'do you bring me my sword?'

Nawn realised that he had approached empty-handed. He turned to fetch the blade, but then paused.

'Do you need to do this thing?' he asked quietly. The others, Bartold, Amrath and a few observers, were keeping their distance.

'I need to do something,' Bron answered, 'and this is what presents itself. Nawn, my friend —it is as though I am fighting both to stay in and escape from a darkness of my own making: if the candle that is my soul gets no air soon it will falter and die. Do you understand? As though you had

fought with yourself over leaving your home in the Valley, and only by leaving could you triumph in that contest. The darkness in my mind that cloaks my very name from me is there through my own doing, I begin to see. I must undo it — but, being tired of fighting with myself, I will face this oppressor of these people. In confronting death, perhaps I will find my own life.'

He paused, smiling at Nawn.

'You have been a good friend thus far,' he said after a moment. 'I know that you would not have the life you so carefully saved in the Valley thrown needlessly away. But do not think that it will be so simple to kill me! I feel a skill with the sword in my arms and my blood: whatever I am or was, I was able with the blade, and that stays with me. And this is no ordinary blade, do you not think? Fetch it for me.'

Nawn brought the golden sword to him in its blue and crimson scabbard. Bron unsheathed it, and Nawn noticed the quietness and awe which fell on the onlookers nearby as he held it slowly up. Though there was no sunlight to shine on it, it glowed with the light above the clouds as though it was not of the mortal world.

'No, this is a special thing,' Bron said, 'and that I yield it to you to bear seems no light thing to me, but is a measure of my bond with you —for this sword is part of my life, and its fate is bound up in some way with mine —of that at least I am certain!'

He brought the sword down and clasped Nawn's hand.

'Fear not, Nawn,' he said. 'I do not think my time has come yet —not until I face the Hooded Man whose name I have stolen. Wait here for me! And let us see what manner of

warrior they make in distant Turgal!

So saying he strode off, leaving behind his cloak and emerging from the trees into the grey rain. He reached the spear in a few moments. Nawn watched the trees opposite for a while but nothing moved. The others, some cowering now behind trees, waited also. Bartold and Amrath came to his side.

'Your friend is either very brave or very foolish,' said Amrath after a while had passed and stillness had filled the clearing.

Nawn said nothing.

The dreary rain smeared the outline of the trees opposite. Bulky shadows loomed out of the grey horizon, unstirred by any wind. Bron waited, a lonely figure by the single spear below. Suddenly, one of the shadows moved, even as Nawn watched it—it walked down the hill and took on a shape. With a cold tremble, Nawn realised that it was a man: very tall and very broad, dressed in an armour of light brass plates and red cloth, his helmeted head as high as a tower. Though he was indeed no more than seven feet tall, to Nawn it seemed that he was taller than the dim trees behind him. Nawn suddenly feared that he would not see Bron alive again. From the brief glance he stole at the others, he knew they felt the same.

Bron had not moved. As the giant Balar approached, however, Bron's sword came up. The Turgalin unsheathed his own blade, a barbed silver thing that seemed as tall as Bron himself. He stood some feet away from Bron and Nawn thought he saw the look of an evil grin on his face beneath the shadow of his helmet.

Bron had no armour, Nawn realised, and would be cut to pieces —there had been none in the village, and no time to make any. There now seemed little hope that he would last more than a minute with the Turgalin —he looked like no more than a child, standing in the shadow of his opponent. Nawn heard a dark laugh from Balar, and some words he could not hear were exchanged. Then swiftly, before he finished speaking, the Turgalin struck, sweeping at Bron's legs and then back in a blur of movement at Bron's head.

Bron leapt and dived, avoiding the silver blade and stepping back. Balar came on, lunging downwards and across —Bron jumped aside, missing the downward stroke and parrying the following blow. The ring of metal against metal came to the listeners a brief second later, and then again, as Balar twisted and struck at Bron's heart but was parried again.

Nawn was astonished at the speed of the thing. He had never seen a battle before, and knew nothing of swordplay, but had somehow imagined that it would be a slower and easier affair, with each move planned and with gaps between blows for the combatants to rest and think —but it was not like that at all. Perhaps, down on the battlefield, time was different for those involved, and each blow swept by them more slowly than it seemed from a distance, but as Nawn watched, in the space of a breath three more blows had been struck and avoided.

Balar was the one doing the striking: blow after blow fell either to Bron's right or left, or swept under his feet or above him. The giant seemed to have limitless strength, nor did Nawn feel that he had yet exerted himself. Bron, on the other

hand, seemed scarcely to have time to aim a blow, and was driven from point to point in the field for a long time until he began to stumble.

Nawn lost any idea of the time, but felt that perhaps an hour had passed in this way before his friend, seeing a sudden opening, lunged at the Turgalin—but the golden sword was brushed aside as swiftly and effortlessly as though it were a wand of wood, and Bron was driven back again, this time into the branches of a tree, from which he escaped only by swinging himself under them and out of the way of Balar's hacking sword which hewed splinters from the wood.

Nawn gasped as Bron, clambering up from beside the tree, stumbled, and narrowly avoided the descending sword of his enemy, sliding down the muddy hillside out of range. Balar turned again to him, and spoke, his words filling the clearing:

'Is this land full of rabbits?' he said, in a large and heavy voice. 'Or are there true warriors here? It is no wonder that my prince found it so easy to conquer this land! Even with a golden sword the men here are mere shadows! Would that I could meet and slay the High King of this country, for only in such a contest would there be any merit for so great a warrior as I!'

Bron stood up. The rain was now falling more heavily, and he was drenched with mud. He said nothing, and waited for Balar to descend the hill to him. They clashed again, silver sword meeting golden in arcs that glittered in the rain. The sounds of their striking blades echoed around the clearing. Nawn saw Bron driven back again and again, splashing

through what were now large pools of water as he was pursued, barely managing to deflect each blow. It would not be long now, he thought —Bron must surely be exhausted, and would not last another hour.

But as the painful time crept on, Bron stayed on his feet, and it was Balar who seemed to grow slower. The taller man's blows were now heavier, it seemed to Nawn, and he began to hear the grunts of exertion from Balar as each sweep of the silver sword became harder. Before he could begin to feel any stirrings of hope, however, he saw Bron fall, and the Turgalin standing over him aiming a final strike at his quarry's heart. Nawn almost cried out —but he held his breath as he saw Bron slither sideways, and Balar slip in the mud and crash down by his side. Quicker than the wind they were both on their feet again, swords ready. The contest was now more even than it had been, Nawn thought, with Balar showing signs of strain —but the Turgalin still had the advantages of height, and armour, and sheer power. One blow from Balar's sword and Bron would perish, but it would take several strikes from the golden blade before the armoured giant would even feel it.

Nevertheless, Bron fought on, proving his words to Nawn that he had some skill with swords —his speed and moves with the blade were the equal of the giant's, and the golden blade danced lightly in his hand as though it had a life of its own. But, as another hour went by, the stamina of the Turgalin with his great bulk did not seem to flag further, and the contest went into its third hour with Bron scratched badly on his left arm but scarcely a mark on his opponent.

Balar pursued Bron, stroke by stroke, up the hillside,

hacking the muddy ground as Bron avoided the blows, but driving his quarry on, coming closer and closer to the trees where the observers stood. Amrath and the others drew back, but Nawn remained, too anxious to think for himself. He watched as Bron stumbled backwards into the first of the trees, and saw the great weariness in his friend's face. Again, he had somehow assumed that warriors in battle were grim and felt no fear—but, with a pang of anguish, he saw that it was not so: terror and desperation, as well as grimness and resignation, filled Bron's eyes. When death was so near, Nawn thought, how could it be otherwise?

Nawn cried out as Balar lunged down with what seemed might be a killing blow, but Bron had once more rolled aside. However, the cry had drawn Balar's eyes to Nawn, hiding behind the tree. The giant moved as quick as lightning, grasping Nawn's cloak and flinging him out from the shelter onto the exposed hillside.

'Vermin!' cried the Turgalin. 'More vermin! Is there no one here worthy to be my conqueror?' And he aimed a killing blow at Nawn's defenceless heart.

But Nawn was suddenly aware of two things: first was the weariness in Balar's face, no less intense than in Bron's—and perhaps there lurked there also, beneath the falsity of pride and arrogance, a similar terror and urgency to that of Bron's; and second, he heard a voice speaking above the rain behind the giant.

'Aye, Turgalin outlaw,' it said in the High Tongue, so firm and strong that Balar stayed his blow and turned from Nawn to face it. 'Aye, there is! I am thy conqueror—leave him, and fight me!'

Nawn glanced across to look at Bron —it was the same muddied warrior standing there breathless in the grey light, dripping with water, but it was a new man also: the voice was full of a power that Nawn had not heard before. Balar seemed to sense it too —the giant paused, looking on his opponent as though for the first time.

‘Who art thou?’ said the Turgalin.

‘Call me the Man in the Hood,’ Bron replied, ‘for what is a name but something through which another can know the unnamed soul within? The warrior who knows himself needs no name.’

So saying, Bron leaped forward and the golden sword in his hand moved faster than light, arcing and curving in glittering sweeps which drove Balar back down the hillside, his own sword held high to parry each blow —but Nawn saw that as the golden blade struck the silver, sparks leapt into the rain, and slivers of the silver were being chipped from Balar’s blade, such was the ferocity of his opponent’s onslaught. There soon came a ringing clash, and Balar’s sword splintered in his hand and was flung helplessly aside. Swiftly, the giant drew forth his battle-axe from his belt, but he could not get the space to swing it, and it was too heavy and unwieldy to parry the strokes that now descended on him in great succession, smiting the plates of brass that he wore until several of them were cut from the red cloth beneath.

Gold swept through the grey clearing, and Balar’s helmet hurtled from his head through the air to land with a heavy splash in a pool of water yards away. The giant’s black, braided hair now leapt free, but, as the armour was steadily

chipped away, Nawn saw that Balar's arms and face were covered with blood, and that the giant was dizzy and almost senseless. In a few brief moments, the combatants had reached the other side of the clearing. Nawn froze as he saw other warriors, dressed similarly in brass and red, rush out to defend their captain—but Balar raised his hand as he saw them too, and they came no nearer.

The Turgalin had fallen, and lay in grey mud on the opposite hill, but, in the stillness that followed, Nawn heard his words carrying over the air to all who stood there waiting, as Bron stood over him, breathing hard, and strangely still after the blur of motion that he had been.

'Slay me, then, Hooded One,' Balar said, 'for if I guess right, it would be no shame for me to perish by this blade.'

Bron did not move, but looked down into the Turgalin's eyes.

'What art thou saying?' he said after a moment. 'What do you know of this sword?'

Balar's eyes searched his opponent's, and came to a conclusion.

'Perhaps thou dost not know, indeed,' he said, half to himself, 'and it falls to me to tell thee. Thou bearest the blade, I think, that even in Turgal is the matter of legend. I do not know of any other golden sword so fine and shining, though how thou came by it, I know not, for it was lost an age ago, tales tell. I thought it was so when first I saw it, but my judgement discounted it, saying that no matter what the sword, it is the warrior who holds it that decides the contest. Indeed, I still think so—but thou hast become that warrior before my eyes this day, and if my death is thy birth then so

be it! Do you truly not know that which thou wieldest?

‘Speak!’ commanded Bron.

Balar raised himself up.

‘Thou holdest in thy hand the Sword Sundergost, greatest blade forged for the hand of a mortal —made, they say, from the tooth of the Firebeast in ancient times! And I shall not be ashamed to have it pierce my heart! Strike me now!’

But Bron paused, and Nawn could tell from where he stood that the name of the sword had struck him with more power than any of the giant’s blows. Nawn thought that his friend would swoon where he stood. Many moments of silence passed before Bron spoke again.

‘Balar, I will not slay thee,’ he said, ‘and thou wilt not perish by this blade in any future time, unless thou cross my path with evil-doing again —for as thou hast given me life, so I will spare thee. Tell thy company to yield to the men of Shand who wait here, and submit yourself to the justice of this realm beneath its High King.’

‘Thou sparest me into shame,’ Balar replied, ‘for it is our way in Turgal to fight to the death.’

‘Then mayhap the Turgalin way needs to change,’ said Bron, ‘for both war and death lead not to true glory. Command thy men!’

Balar barked out orders to the warriors who had hung back in the Waste behind him, and they came out of the trees unquestioningly. The men of Shand, who had heard all these words, and were full of awe, took Balar and his companions and bound them firmly, disarming them.

Bron stood before Balar again then, holding Sundergost before him.

‘What else dost thou know of this blade?’ said Bron. Balar smiled darkly, the blood running from his many wounds in the rain that still streamed down on them all, washing the sword as they stood.

‘That is all I know, and more perhaps than I should have spoken, for, knowing what it is thou hast, thou mayst in time deliver it to its rightful wielder,’ he said.

‘Its rightful wielder?’ said Nawn, who had recovered himself enough to speak.

‘Aye!’ said Balar, looking down at Nawn as though from the peak of a mountain, ‘do ye not have tales or songs in Shand? Are the times of the great kings forgotten here? Sundergost belongs to the line of Valkurn who first brought it out of the fire; and only the rightful king of Shand, the minstrels say, should wield it. Now that I have said all that I know, I may have doomed my prince—for they say that when the High King holds Sundergost, he is invincible. No matter! My life is over and shame, like death, descends on me. May it be missing from that High King’s hand when he faces death!’

And the giant spat and laughed grimly as the Shand men led him away, three of them surrounding him with swords.

Bron then reeled and fell to the earth, and Nawn and Bartold were at his side.

‘The High King,’ Bron was muttering to himself, ‘the High King. And the Sword Sundergost. What does it mean? What do these words mean?’

Amrath came up then, and looked down at Bron where he lay in Nawn’s arms.

‘I think it means, lord,’ he said, ‘that you must journey

swiftly to Shandhall to meet with the lords there as soon as may be. For out of the wilderness did you come, bearing hope and deliverance, and the realm has ever had need of these things, as we have seen. I have horses, and I would gladly give them to you as a token of reward for your deed today.'

'Shandhall,' said Nawn. 'Is that far?'

'Many leagues,' replied Amrath, 'and spring already draws on. The great council was to be held in the middle of the season. If you left at once and rode like the wind, maybe you would be there in time.'

'And what would we say to them, once we arrived?' asked Nawn.

Amrath looked at them both strangely.

'Sword-bearer, I do not think there will be a great need of speech,' he said.

SHANDHALL AND THE ROAD SOUTH

*There the High King built the golden hall
To greet the dawn and honour the evening
Sun, splendid and shining, shimmering
At the heart of Shand, hard by the Seat
Of Stonehammer, where Four Kingdoms meet.*

-from The Song of Valkurn

For Nawn, the next few days were full of a racing time and a swiftly growing space that expanded around him as though he were taking a breath that had no limit—for, returning to Remskillieth, they at once collected Amrath's horses and rode off, not waiting for the cheered greetings of the crowds that had already gathered to welcome them. Before the end of that day of battle they were riding south, beyond the Woodland Waste and through wide farmlands on either side. Amrath and Bartold, in great gratitude, had given them food and gold enough to sustain them, and had blessed their journey and set them on the right road, binding Bron's wounds and wishing him speed and fortune. Nothing more had been said of the Sword or any other matters.

Bron had fallen silent on this and all other subjects, too, and Nawn was too bewildered to question him, but he wondered to himself: he had not heard of the Sword Sundergost in his secret valley where few tales came and fewer were remembered, but from the words that Balar had spoken he knew that he had been caught up in greater events than he would have thought possible. But what did it mean?

If Bron bore Sundergost, how had he come by it, and what was he to do with it? He looked down at the golden sword where it lay carefully strapped among their meagre baggage—Bron had entrusted it to his care as Sword-bearer even now, when he knew what it was, and that moved Nawn to realise how much this strange wanderer now trusted him—and he wondered to what end would it lead him as well as Bron.

Bron, meanwhile, rode in a grim passion, galloping down the rough lanes and through the woods as fast as his tired steed would take him, saying little, his whole mind closed and fixed upon their goal: Shandhall, where the High Throne sat, Amrath had told them, and where the lords of the Four Kingdoms would soon meet to decide the fate of Shand. Nawn and Bron rode through southern Miria, northernmost of the realms of Shand; to the east lay the upland plains and heaths of Valadria; westward the rolling meadows stretched to the Shandbound River that wound about the borders of the land, dividing it from the Great Western Wild; southward, towards the heart of the kingdom, lay green hills, the borders of Miria with Restonia and the South Vales: in those hills, rising to the west, lay the golden towers of the Shandhall, where the High King built his home in ages past. There, behind richly coloured windows which caught the westering sun, sat the golden Throne of Lond—empty, since the High King had vanished long ago.

But, Nawn thought as they rode along through spring showers and sunshine and the world opened up so wide around him that his head spun with it and his lungs could not take in the sweetness or wildness of the wind, what had

he heard earlier? A High King had returned, but now was missing with his queen —and then Bron had appeared from nowhere on his doorstep in the Valley, bearing the High King's sword. He was not certain enough to make the jump from one to the other, but he was sure that these things were what filled the mind of his friend as they rode along.

With each hour he felt Bron grow stronger, though his companion said nothing —it was in his movements, his eyes, the light in his face: he was regaining himself, casting off all doubts and confusions, coming to himself, waking from the dark trance that he had been trapped in. He still wore the dark hood and cloak, however, and hid his face as they rode through any town or village, bidding Nawn fetch food so that he would not be seen. Nawn pondered this —it was as though Bron, though growing certain himself of who he might be, kept the moment of true revelation secret, holding back until he could choose the time.

By riding so swiftly and resting little they made good time, and entered the hills at the centre of Shand no more than five days after they had set out with the blessings of Amrath and Bartold and the people of Remskillieth. Here the country lanes widened, but also wound up through well-watered valleys to the tops of green ridges, and they looked down on a wide and prosperous land, stretching to the edge of their sight in all directions. Nawn was growing accustomed to the lack of mountains now, and could gaze into the hazy distance without anxiety —but, as he did so, he thought he could glimpse, on the very edge of sight, north, south and east, the dim shadows of peaks. He especially gazed north toward the Penning —how far he had come

since agreeing to ride with Bron! League upon league of lands divided him now from the corner of the world he had always called home—but he had to ride on. Somewhere out in the wide world was his father.

They had not paused for long in any place of men along the way, and at first the ways had been quiet, but as they went further south more and more travellers appeared on the roads: farmers driving sheep or cattle, or riding on great wagons to local markets, merchants riding in groups from town to town, and here and there richly dressed women and their noble husbands heading towards Shandhall like them. Shand was a land recovering from war—everywhere there were signs of new life with the season: barns and farmhouses were being built or repaired, fire-ravaged land was being cleared, goods were being carried along the lanes and highways. Shand was alive—all it needed now, Nawn thought, was its King.

There came an evening when they had reached the crown of the highest hill in that upland, and the stars were beginning to shine above in a sky that was wide and clear. Here Nawn saw on the horizon to the east a crag of exposed rock which pointed like the finger of the earth itself towards the darkening sky: the Seat of Stonehammer, it was called, Bron said as they approached it, the place where the first kings of Shand had been crowned. Their horses, tired with another day's hard riding, now climbed slowly up the steep slopes about its feet. Bron dismounted then, and, finding a path amidst the rocks, clambered up the stone face of the outcropping as the sun died in the west. Soon Nawn, following him, stood breathless on the peak. This was as near

to the centre of Shand as mattered —as far as he could see in every direction lay the Four Kingdoms: Restonia, Miria, Valadria and the South Vales. They were at peace in the twilight. A rough stone seat, large enough for a giant, carved by the wind and rain, loomed out of the rock there.

Bron stared out around him for a long while before turning to Nawn and saying:

‘The faces I saw in the Pool in your Valley —the bejewelled woman, the beautiful princess— all my life I had thought that they were fleeing from me, betraying me, abandoning me. The world, I thought, was taking them all, leaving me alone and with nothing. Nothing but a sword, that I held onto grimly, as though it were a rope and I was drowning. But it was not so, Nawn —it was not so.’

He turned and looked out across the wide landscape.

‘I was fleeing from them,’ he said. ‘Whether the moment of my choice came before or after they had withdrawn from me in this world, the choice was nevertheless mine: I left them, every one, in my heart. It did not have to be that way, I see that now. Love is a choice that we make.’

Nawn said nothing. To the east, down on the next fold of the land, but still some distance away, the very last ray of that day’s sun caught something golden and it flashed momentarily at them. Bron shook himself and looked down at it.

‘Come!’ he said. ‘We must briefly rest, and then ride on. There lies Shandhall, where the lords meet on the morrow, in the middle of spring, as Amrath said. Before tomorrow’s dawn we must be there!’

They descended from that high place and made a swift

camp at the foot of the stone, and Nawn fell into a deep sleep while looking up at the frosty stars.

Well before dawn they were awake and moving again, down the winding lane and up onto the opposite hillside where Nawn had seen the golden glimmer that evening. The land was dark and quiet, but full of the expectancy that hovers in the air before sunrise —Nawn felt the birds beginning to stir.

Villages clustered by the side of the road around the great hall which was the travellers' destination. Here, Nawn knew, was the seat of the High King —and while no one had sat on the Golden Throne of Lond for many a year, life still thrived around it, for it was the meeting place of many roads in the heart of the Four Kingdoms. It was now the middle of spring in a year of hope —a long and cruel war had ended with the hosts of the enemy swept out of the realm, and the lords of the land were gathering. Nawn looked up the hillside and saw for the first time the golden towers of that place touched by the pale light of the east.

They were very tall, those towers, taller than any structure of mortals that he had seen, and they seemed indeed to be made of gold. High in their walls great windows of glass gleamed in the dawnlight. Huge trees grew around them. This seemed more like a palace than a fortress of war, Nawn thought —and indeed it had been built, as he had learned, in a time of peace, to celebrate victory and to honour the glory that had brought it, though it was still a strong place and well-defended. With a tremble of awe, Nawn realised that the sword he was carrying, if it were Sundergost, had been

part of those celebrations, part of that glory, and that it had been upon its power that a great part of the power of Shand had rested in ages past. He felt as though they rode from the ordinary world of night and the fading stars into a song with the coming of the day.

And ride they did, quickly, without pausing at any inn or place by the wayside, until, as the sun rose above the brow of the east, Nawn heard a mighty horn sound, and saw flags unfurl on the towers ahead, and they neared a gate in a wall so huge that it seemed like a part of the hillside itself. The gate was rolled back to greet the new day. A large crowd had already gathered outside, waiting for admittance into the citadel. Nawn saw that it might take some time before they would pass through the gate and under that immense stone watchtower—but then Bron came to his side and took the sword from him.

Bron had been intensely silent all that morning. Words welled up in him, Nawn knew, but perhaps he could not yet express them, or perhaps they were saved for song. A quiet but potent strength could be felt in him as they came towards the hall—now Bron, unsheathing the sword, stood in his saddle and held Sundergost aloft, crying in a great voice:

‘Make way, people of Shand! Make way for the Golden Sword and he who brings it to its home—the Man in the Hood!’

The throng turned and saw the rays of the rising sun glint on the golden blade, and a hush fell on them, and they silently stood aside as Nawn and Bron urged their horses forward and passed under the gate.

As they passed inside, Bron resheathed the sword, but

Nawn heard the growing murmur behind them in the crowd. Before they had passed under the shadow of the stone, however, sentries came forward with spears and blocked their way.

‘Who passes under Valkurn’s Arch?’ said one, sensing strangeness in the newcomers.

Bron dropped his black hood for the first time since they had entered the more crowded lands of men, and said, simply:

‘His heir.’

The sentry, looking on Bron’s face, looked dumbfounded and immediately fell on one knee and bowed his head.

‘Sire, thou may pass, and with good cheer,’ he said.

‘Rise, Brideaen of the Guard,’ Bron said, ‘and go before me to open all the doors. I have urgent need to meet with the lords that are at counsel within.’

Brideaen nodded, and rose, and went ahead, as the other sentries fell back in awe. Nawn looked about him. In the growing light of the morning he could see wide lawns stretching from the inner side of the great outer wall through to the tall trees that had peered even over the battlements of the place. Water trickled somewhere, and a fountain splashed with coloured light some way off. A cool air and many fragrances rested here, untouched as yet by the spring sun. Going a little further in, they dismounted and parted from their horses, which grooms came forward to collect and lead away.

Nawn looked at his own clothes and those of his companion, and wondered if some of the murmured astonishment he had heard was due to their state —they

looked like two tired vagabonds who had swum through mud and climbed thorn trees to arrive here, in the garden of kings. But, now that he had thrown back his black hood, Nawn saw from Bron's face that here was no vagabond, but a prince among men —here at last was the true man whom he had known only by the name Bron, his eyes shining as the sunlight touched the golden walls about him, his face bright with power and gentleness. Nawn would readily, he thought, swear his allegiance to such a man.

They went on, hurrying through the wide, green lawns to another arch, many times the height of a man, which led into a deep chamber. Here, light flowed in from high windows, streaming through the pale air to fall on many huge tapestries full of bright, intertwined colours and designs. Nawn glimpsed pictures, and knew that these weavings told many tales —but they did not wait to read them. Bron strode on, down that long hall and through to the next. Nawn looked from side to side, hardly breathing in his wonder at the size and beauty of the place. They passed through another hall where water flowed into a pool under a bright window in the ceiling, and then came to a long passage. Everywhere, people around them paused and drew back from them —no one spoke, but Nawn knew that word of some kind had gone ahead, for each face, as it turned to them, nodded or bowed or drew back, falling silent. Many lords and ladies were there, Nawn saw: white-cloaked women with silver armour from Valadria; tall and red-haired warriors from southern Rondar; the large, richly-robed lords of the South Vales; crowned and coroneted heads from all over Shand. As Bron and Nawn passed through their ranks

they followed behind, until Bron was at the head of a great and colourful procession, gathering speed as they approached the heart of that place. Nawn strove to recall all that he had learned on the journey —of the women-warriors of Valadria, the bearded lords, the bright ladies— but the sheer scope and magnificence of it all overwhelmed him and he yielded to it until he was borne like a leaf upon a wave into the Throne Chamber of Shandhall.

Here, under a roof so high that it hung above them like a richly-patterned cloud in a sky of blues, silvers and greys, and beneath windows that let in sunlight in bright shafts as though it shone between narrow mountain peaks, many had already gathered. They were surrounded now by hundreds, but all made way before Bron, and Nawn his Sword-bearer, as they walked down the middle of that room towards the Throne of Lond.

It stood there gleaming golden in the shafts of light from the windows, as though a piece of the sun itself had fallen there. It was raised from the floor of the chamber by many steps, and draped behind it was a cloth of deep blue, woven with gold. Seven golden statues stood between the cloth and the back of the Throne, as though seven courtiers gathered there to advise the King, frozen in time.

Bron reached the first steps and began to climb. A great silence had fallen all around them. Nawn saw that many looked on Bron and recognised him, moving to speak in their astonishment, but the general awe forbade them and they held back. Nawn wondered if he himself would now be forgotten —Bron, recalling his past, would have many friends: not being alone anymore he would have no need of

his young companion from the distant and insignificant Valley. Nawn would be dismissed, his duty done; he would leave this hall once Bron was re-installed there, and ride back alone to his home, handing back the affairs of the world to their rightful possessors, these mighty lord and ladies and their young, brave King. As he mounted the steps, he thought that instead he should be descending them: his time was over.

But Bron had now reached the top, and turned, standing before the Throne. The quietness that filled that place was a tangible thing—it and the golden light that hung about the Throne were like one entity, part of a silent song or music that would be re-lived from that time on. After a moment, Bron sat down, and a huge cheer suddenly broke the silence, and went on for a timeless while. Nawn stood to one side, tears in his eyes. So, it was done, he thought. He had brought the High King home.

But Bron, speaking to him only above the noise of the shouting, leaned close and said:

‘Nawn, my true name is Arime.’

And Nawn went to him and embraced him, as a new cheer echoed around that vast chamber and the golden air shook with the joy and wonder of it.

Now wonders came with such a pace upon Nawn that he could later scarcely recall them.

Arime’s first act after the cheers had died away, was to make Nawn a knight of the realm of Shand—he kneeled before Sundergost and was made the Bearer of the Sword, and took it from Arime, sitting on a lower step before the

Throne with it on his knee as the King addressed the gathering.

There were many questions in the general joy at Arime's return, and the darkest of these, and most immediate, concerned the fate of the Queen-to-be, the Princess Lonia. Nawn now learned for the first time, as Arime now recalled that black night, of the abduction of Lonia by the evil phantom form of the Hooded Man, and the lords learned of how Arime had wandered far in a trance and a nightmarish dream, calling out her name and swooning in the wilderness.

'She did not come,' Arime said, 'she did not come. And that, my lords, struck me deeper than the fear of that phantom or any deprivation of food or rest. My mind emptied then of all love and light, and I called at the end upon Raendu before I forgot even his name—but my feet, guided perhaps by him or by some other will, found the long-lost road to a place hidden from the world for years uncounted, and there I found solace, friendship and new strength.'

Several of the lords and kings had gathered close upon the steps now—amongst them were some older faces whom Nawn now knew as Barragath of the Hammer, Colomain, King of Rondar, and the Lord Ulforth of the South Vales, who was bent and walked with a silver staff.

'But what was this evil, hooded thing?' said Barragath. 'And how did it pass into the kingdom? And where might it have taken the Lady?'

'I know not,' Arime replied, 'but these are matters for our council, which now becomes even more urgent. The Princess Lonia must be recovered, that much is certain—and I will

not be crowned as High King until she sits at my side. But let the Hooded Man beware! For I have stolen his mantle and his name, and though Sundergost itself seemed useless against him, I believe now that other things than swords may wound him deeper.

‘But now, my lords,’ he went on, ‘let us feast and then speak together—for though there will be undoubtedly much to set in order about the realm, I am faint with my travels and I and my companion here have need of some rest.’

And so Nawn was led away and bathed in gentle water, dressed in smooth, silken robes and ate at a great table, sitting beside the High King—and then, before noon, they all filed into a large room draped with coloured hangings and sat around a long, black table, and Arime was told of all the events of Shand since he had disappeared, and news came to him also of other realms.

This is what Nawn learned: since Arime’s victory in the autumn of the previous year, Shand had been for the most part free from the grand armies of the enemy—Reavers had fled or surrendered; Turgalins had submitted to their new Emperor’s will or been cast out; and Shadowed Men, obeying only the voice of the Morndred, their masters, had either hidden in the woods or disappeared south or west into the wild lands. A few roaming bands of each of these hosts, or single rebels, remained to torment parts of the countryside, however, and Galatar of Turgal had set out with strong companies of men to oust even these as soon as the thaw of the spring had permitted it. But a gloom had descended on all the realm on the disappearance of their

prince, whom many had hoped to see crowned before winter came, uniting all the ravaged realm together in a new peace and prosperity —and many other companies of men, led by either Galatar or Barragath or other lords of the kingdom had been despatched to seek for him, but they had all returned empty-handed, save one.

That had been led by Ulforth and he, being greatly skilled in woodcraft, had found the glade in northern Miria where he believed Arime and Lonia had ridden, and he found there a single gauntlet, which those who recognised it said belonged to the king —and many then despaired, fearing that some wandering evil or even wild beast had done a dark deed. Yet no other trace could be found —neither bone, nor garment, nor sign, except that two horses, which the groom said he had given to his lord and lady, were discovered abandoned in the woods.

Other mysteries were brought up there, one by Nawn himself: what of the signs or sounds which had led Nawn to Arime in the snow of the hidden Valley? Whose voice or hand had guided him? And what was the meaning of the things seen in the waters of the Pool?

No one knew who might have disturbed Nawn so far from any of the known lands of mortals, nor how Arime had come there, blind and in the heart of winter —but of the vision in the Pool one thing seemed clear: what Arime and Nawn had both seen was Wenfold Well. Arime then told of his first journey there, and of the Warden, and of the Green Door; he went on to tell of the terrible journey beneath the earth, and of the finding of the Sword.

‘And, my lords,’ he said, as they listened to him in awe,

for many there had not heard that tale, 'know ye this: if I am to return to Wenfold, then I am also to return through the Green Door and along that grim road to its end. The Herald who was with me then tried to get me to walk that road at that time —and maybe much sorrow and bloodshed would not have come to pass had I heeded him then. Now that Raendu has delivered me back to the daylight, it seems clear that my feet must travel that way once more, this time alone if need be.'

There was some protest and astonishment at this, but Barragath asked:

'Sire, I am no man for words or the doings of the gods, but did not Tarazion say that you were to look for his face in the waters of Kaela? Does this not mean then that he lives yet? Would it not be a wise course then to seek him out, and speak with him before you walk over such a dark threshold and we once again lose our King?'

'That Tarazion lives, I have little doubt now,' Arime replied, 'but what form that life may take, who can say? We are but mortals here, and his was the life of a Herald of Raendu. And I saw the fire into which he descended, and felt its heat —no mortal flesh could stay in such a place and not melt or burn.'

Here he glanced over at Nawn, and smiled gently and with sadness, but Nawn did not grasp what he meant to convey with that look.

'And I looked in the waters of Kaela, deep in the hidden Valley, guided there by the Bearer of the Sword,' he went on, 'and yet I did not see the Herald's face there, only the face of the Hooded Man.'

‘And one other,’ said Ulforth, leaning forward. ‘One other face you said you saw there: the face of Nawn Woodwarden, who was to be Swordbearer, who was with you then.’

‘How do you read this, my lord Ulforth?’ asked Colomain.

Ulforth shrugged and fell back again.

‘I know not,’ he said, ‘but it seems to me, as you well know from your minstrel arts, that in dealing with matters of song we would do well to heed the smallest note. They say the world of the gods is a dream, in which things that seem to mortals meaningless and small loom large and have power beyond their visible worth. If that is what was seen in the waters, and that is what was said by the Herald, we should take note of it —no more, at least not until things become plainer.’

‘I had noted it, Ulforth,’ said Arime, ‘but I can speak plainer of this matter now —for with my returning memory came certainty on one other matter.’

He turned to face Nawn again, and said in the High Tongue:

‘Nawn, who was thy father? For thou hast not yet spoken his name to me.’

Nawn said:

‘Maranain of Rondar.’

‘And did he not have but one eye, his other covered by a patch?’

Nawn nodded. He had not thought anyone outside the Valley would know that. A sudden thrill ran through him as he felt what was to come then.

Arime kept his eyes on Nawn, and looked on him gently.

‘Thou wouldst not know this,’ he went on, ‘for thou hast

been away from the affairs of the world in the hidden Valley all thy life —but thy father had other names when he wandered in the lands of men beyond the Valley. I saw that he must have been thy father when my mind returned to me —thou hast his look, his face. One of his names was Tarazion, who called himself Herald of Raendu.'

Then a great murmur of awe went around the chamber, and Nawn felt himself swoon. His father —Arime had known his father? The Herald had been his father? Then so much now seemed true and possible that his mind could not contain it. He had indeed been summoned then, as his father had said; his father lived, and had called to him. He could barely stay to hear more.

The kings and lords there did him honour but he was almost oblivious to them. It seemed to him suddenly that life was not as he had imagined it —a strand of light, stemming from some heaven above, ran through the affairs of the world, and what he had thought were the events of mortal men were merely the beads threaded on the necklace of time by the hands of the gods.

Somehow he survived the thought. He knew he was no Herald of Raendu, whether his father was or not. He was merely Nawn of the Valley. But Arime stood and held him in greeting. In finding his own memory, the High King had found his old friend anew, Nawn thought.

The moment passed. Nawn was left to think through all the chains of thought that had come together: if his father had indeed been Tarazion, a Herald of Raendu, what did that now mean? He pondered that as the council went on: many matters concerning the kingdoms were brought there and

put in order, but always the lords turned back to what was now to be done.

And some said that nothing should be done, for was not Shand now at peace, and the enemy's hosts driven out? Why could there not now be a time of peace, when the realm could prosper—a Thirdpeace, ushered in by the recovery of the legendary Sundergost? Turgal was now an ally; Tara over the mountains could now be freed also; the Middle Lands could be brought back into the general good ruling of their larger neighbour. All was as well as it had been for as long as any could remember, in fact, and the people were weary of war and ready for peace. Why pursue phantoms? Was not the Princess surely dead? And if not, should not others seek her out while the High King remained on the Throne?

These later things were not so much said as implied by those lords for whom the ordering of the realm held priority—they did not wish to offend the King. Arime took no offence, but found words hard to find to convey the other thought that swelled unspoken about that chamber even as it was opposed. The wonder of Arime's coming to the Valley and his meeting with Tarazion's own son had spellbound them all, despite their counsels of caution. Then Arime seemed to find his voice:

'That was my mother's error,' he said at last, rising from his seat and walking to the window, his back to the room. 'She walked even less of the road than have I, trusted even less in Raendu than have I, turned even more into the shadows for peace than have I: and because of it much evil has been done. She thought also that any power brought peace, and any peace brought contentment.

‘Perhaps it was so for a while; perhaps it would be so for Shand—for a year, a life of a man, an age. But when the road lies plain before the traveller’s feet, is he not beckoned to walk it to its end? And does the fate of the world lie truly with a sword, or in the hearts of men and women? I was afraid to walk the road that the Herald showed me, and I am afraid still, and in that fear I would gladly find reason not to walk it. There is surely reason enough: we have Sundergost, the enemy is crushed, our former enemies are our allies. But think, my lords! Search your hearts! Has our enemy ever truly sought conquest of lands only? Is his aim the domination of humanity through its kings and queens? Or is his true prize something different, something which seems to us small and thin and of no consequence by the light of day: does he not seek our souls?

‘Whether we lie in his dungeons suffering the agonies that only his tormented mind could devise, or whether we live in a fool’s peace that is his design, is his victory not the same? Ryna learned this—she walked even into the heart of his Citadel of the Four Winds, and took from him that which she thought he most greatly prized, only to find its cost greater than she had imagined. At the end, she perished in the wilderness, alone but for Raendu’s mercy, her true road unwalked.

‘No, my lords, if we are to rest in our new-found peace, let us do so when the deed is done. And the centre of the Dark Circle’s power is in the Firevault at the heart of the Dark Isles. There, the Herald said, lies the Darkness Impenetrable. I am certain that our road ends there—whether in triumph or despair, I know not. But while we leave that path

unwalked, the darkness swallows our hopes and thrives on the edge of our realms and our lives as it has done for many years.

‘It is the duty of a High King to see that this matter is closed forever, that the people of Shand and the realms about it can live freely and remain free. Think on what has happened, and how Raendu has brought me back among ye all. Can we now deny his call?’

‘And then there is Lonia. Think ye that I could sit on my Golden Throne and guide the affairs of men while she languished in darkness? No —the road must be walked, and I must walk it! Even though it might appear to be a trap; even though I might never return. We must not forget that this is Raendu’s Dream, this world in which we walk. If he opens a door, like as not it leads to glory and joy in the end, even though its threshold seems dark.’

No one spoke in reply. The day had worn away, and through the windows through which Arime peered the sky had grown dim, a few stars shining in the east. Nawn realised suddenly that he had grown ravenously hungry — he had forgotten everything else but his father as the day had gone on.

No one challenged Arime’s words —the marvel of Nawn sat before their eyes confirming, it seemed, Raendu’s design. The council was adjourned, with Arime making it plain that he intended to set out for Wenfold as soon as he could. He would speak with the Warden, he said, and ask about the Hooded Man: was he a phantom only, or an enchanted living thing, or a dream? And what might have happened to the Princess in his shadowy domain? That the Hooded Man

came from the Morndred, no one doubted; that his power could be undone, none were certain. The Darkness that had its source in the Firevault reached far, it seemed. Some left that hall in grey despair, fearing that their king would soon be gone again; but others were not so cheerless, remembering that Nawn had found Arime in the snow —the Herald's son and the High King had been brought together by the gods. And Galatar was to return from his patrols on the morrow. Arime looked forward to seeing his friend again —and Nawn, going to Arime's side as the lords filed out to the supper feast, spoke to him:

'You will not walk that road alone, sire,' he said. 'You will need your Sword-bearer.'

Arime smiled, and they went out to the feasting hall.

Galatar returned the next day. Nawn was astonished by his size —he seemed larger than even Balar— and looked in awe at the great sword he wore at his side, which stories told would burst into flame in battle. Though tall, and with streaks of grey in his dark hair, Galatar was also large of spirit, and rode under Valkurn's Arch with his men to great cheering from the gathered crowd. He sat with Arime in council all through that day, and Nawn was with them as they went over the situation in Shand and the realms around it. Great had been Galatar's joy, and greater his amazement, when Arime told him of his adventures and of his miraculous meeting with Nawn. He was particularly interested in the Hooded Man.

'A dark man in a dark hood?' he said, a fire in his eyes, one almost closed by the deep scar of some ancient wound.

'Perhaps then not all that I heard in the North was rumour!'

'What did you hear?' asked Arime.

'We were in Miria, near where it borders with Valadria and the land rises up out of the meadows into the uplands,' Galatar went on. 'It was a month after your vanishment, and we had sought for you the woods of that region in vain, when a family of shepherds greeted us by the wayside, and, hearing of our quest, they told of a terrible phantom which had moved through the woods not long before: black-robed and hooded, surrounded by mist, and in that mist a pale queen, riding behind the hooded one. I had not thought more of it—either it was a mere tale, or the doings of the enemy's sorcery, a thing of fog and evil shape sent to affright those ordinary folk from the darkness in the east. But now your tale gives it meaning. The pale queen, it seems, was the Princess herself.'

Arime had gone pale, and sat with his fists clenched on the arms of his chair.

'Where were they headed?' he asked after a moment.

'East,' said Galatar, 'across the plains of Valadria, the shepherds said. Would that we had pursued them!'

'Nay, friend Galatar,' said Arime, rising and pacing slowly about the table in thought, 'do not distress yourself so! They were a month ahead of you, and it was not your quest at that time to pursue phantoms in the forest. But now we know this—that what I saw was no dream of my own only, but a thing with substance that others might see and hear. And that gives me some little hope. In my darkest dread I had thought maybe that I was crazed, and that Lonia had fled from me alone. It was not so! The Hooded Man lives! If his ghostly

form is truly life as it lives and breathes beneath the sun. And heading east? Then surely they were headed for the Dark Isles?’

Galatar nodded grimly.

‘The Dark Isles —and the Citadel of the Four Winds,’ he said.

‘To the island of Wormstone, where my mother walked long ago,’ said Arime, half to himself.

After a while he turned back to Galatar and went on:

‘Then what think you of my purpose? I ride to Wenfold as soon as can be, there to speak with the Warden who dwells there, and there to pass over the threshold of the Green Door once more, to walk to the end of the road that the Herald bade me walk.’

‘Of this door you have spoken before, and of the Warden many tales tell,’ said Galatar. ‘I cannot gainsay you —you are the Heir to the High Throne, and must choose your own way. I am afraid lest Shand lose its King again before it has truly found him, before it has recovered from war —but from all that you say, it is clear that Tarazion would have had you walk this road were he alive here today. I cannot say more. Strange are the paths by which the gods lead us. But that they are the paths of the gods, let us not doubt. Though the ancient world fell in fire and chaos more than an age ago, it seems a road was made through that fire to the Sword, for you brought it forth and wear it at your side; and who can tell where else that road may lead? Nay, Arime, if you walk under the world again with Sundergost at your side, following the footsteps of the Herald, who can deny you? But who will go with you? You do not think to go alone?’

Arime smiled at him.

'I would not, I think, be able to,' he said. 'I have too many good friends. And someone, it seems, must carry my sword. But I had not thought to take many. It is a very dark road. Even Nawn here, who would not leave my side, has yet to feel that darkness, and maybe even he will turn back when he comes to it. I would take no one who will not follow freely. And do not rise to put yourself forward, Galatar! You are the Emperor of a distant realm, and the world needs you alive and visible in the daylight! No, as I see it, you have a different role. For, as I have said to the lords here in Shandhall, this matter must end with the fall of Wormstone itself, and the finishing of the Dark Circle whose shadow has so disturbed the world's dreams: I believe we must prepare a great host to sail east, as I walk east beneath the earth. And at the end, before we come to the home of the sun itself, I think we will meet again.'

Arime stood behind his chair and looked at Galatar and Nawn as they listened.

'Galatar, I say to you that at the end of this road I must face the Hooded Man again,' he said intently. 'And in so doing I hope not only to rescue my beloved princess but myself. Maybe the paths of the world and of the mortal heart are the same—I know not. It is clear to me, though, that we must act. Too long have we waited for the enemy to strike before we return a blow. Let us journey to the source of the world's darkness, and stop it up. And let us then leave the world with a Thirdpeace unshadowed by any future evil that we can see.'

He turned away and went quiet for a long while. Neither

Nawn nor Galatar spoke.

‘Noble and brave words, are they not?’ Arime said at last. ‘Any who listened would think me a king indeed. But I do not always feel as brave as my words, my friends. And I miss Lonja so much —that she is tormented in a darkness far from me, and that I wandered the world divorced even from any memory of her, that is a great and hourly burden. Raendu give me strength to bear it until the time comes. I wonder sometimes if she lives yet, or whether she has been put to death in some black prison.’

They did not answer, sensing in the silence the suppressed tears in the prince. Then Galatar stood, and said:

‘Arime, it shall be as you propose. I will gather the Turgalin host for their final journey. Never shall the Dark Isles rise again to overshadow my realm, or yours! May Raendu who has guided you so far guide your feet on the road to the end that you desire!’

He bowed, and withdrew, and Nawn went with him, and Arime did not turn to them but was left alone in the council chamber with his thoughts.

So it was agreed that Shand would rise out of war into arms again, this time to take the battle to the threshold of the enemy. None among the lords and kings there at Shandhall doubted that the enemy remained strong: though he had been driven out of Shand for the most part, and Tara was free, they knew that great hosts could be hidden in the Dark Isles, and that the power of their foe rested not only in force of arms —but the Emperor of Turgal would ride and sail with them, with the strength of his southern lands behind

them, and they had their High King ready to be crowned when victory was won, and he carried with him Sundergost, the Golden Sword of legend. Arime did not let it be widely known that he would at some point leave them to pass through the night under the earth again—he did not think that many would understand.

‘Indeed, Nawn,’ he said to his sword-bearer as they walked through the halls one morning, ‘I do not know if I understand it myself.’

Nevertheless, things were made ready, and as the spring drew on, a large company of men gathered around their prince as an escort through the still-troubled Middle Lands. Arime was very eager to be gone, and at Galatar’s bidding he intended to ride south and cross the Tarrabelner as soon as possible as the advance guard of a larger force which would follow close behind, sweeping down through the many realms that gathered along the banks of that mighty river and driving any remnants of the foe before them, through the Pass of the South and to Tara, where they would join with the Emperor’s fleet that waited there and then on to the final challenge at Wormstone.

Nawn watched all these preparations with great trepidation. Though he somehow knew that his place in all of this was to be at Arime’s side, he often found himself pondering life in the Valley and longing to return there. It would be almost the beginning of the summer there too, he thought, as the trees around the Shandhall burst into their full green life, and no doubt he had been missed by now from the market-places and meetings that would be taking place. He wondered if anyone would truly miss him, and

what would happen to his home should he not return before the end of the year, and Alween's face and his father's often floated before his eyes—but these thoughts were continually broken by the events around him. He was often called upon to attend Arime in meetings, and heard of most of the preparations for their journey; he met many of the lords of the Four Kingdoms, and saw the hosts gathering in the great fields that lay at the feet of the hill upon which Shandhall stood, their thousand colours shining and blowing in the wind. But he was filled for the most part with a restlessness and dread that urged him to be gone.

Within days, this came to pass. Arime rode out to great cheering at the head of a mighty company, with Nawn at his side, and they went south with great speed, travelling over the hills into the South Vales, where wide and warm fields rippled in the winds of an early summer. Continuing south they crossed the Shandbound, leaving the Four Kingdoms, and within a week they had journeyed through the Middle Lands, all their foes fleeing before them, until they crossed the blue Tarrabelner and camped in the foothills of the Guardian Mountains.

All of this journey was a blur to Nawn—the fields, the woods, the towns, the people, all passed him by until he almost swooned with the endlessness of it all. But then, as they rested beneath a white moon on the southern banks of the widest river he had ever seen, Nawn began to realise how large the world must be: from frozen Vildon in the ancient North, where the tales he heard said a tall white tower stood, to the huge mountains in the distant south where the same tales told of giants larger than mountains

who slept till the end of the world; from the Great Wall and the Western Wild to the Land of Stars across the sea in the east —it was all before him now, and the walls of his mountain home, which had protected him from its largeness for so long, were no longer there —they were hundreds of leagues away to the north, lost over many horizons. He felt lost and alone, but also freed, and he wondered what it was that he had to do before his father would let him return to the Valley.

He did not doubt that he would return —that had never really wavered in his mind, though the thought of death had reared up in him now and then— but the weight of his as-yet-unknown future bore down upon him as heavy as the scabbarded sword he carried. Where in all this wild world was his father? Was he alive? Would he see him again before the end?

He wondered what Arime was feeling. A campfire sprang up under the moon, and he went to it, finding Arime sitting there alone, lost in thought. The young prince turned to him and smiled.

‘It will not be easy to leave this company,’ he said quietly, as Nawn sat down beside him. ‘The captain knows my purpose, but the others think that we are being escorted to the Pass, there to cross into Tara. Some are already doubting the wisdom of crossing Tarrabelner, saying that the way east along the north bank is easier here. They are right. I wonder how they will fare when they find their High King missing again? Are we right to do this, Nawn? Should we not stay with them and put our trust, as they do, in force of arms? Should we not go with them and assail the Dark Isles with

our swords? Or am I right in thinking that there is more to it than that?’

The fire crackled and slowly cast its red glow around the trees that fringed the open space where they had halted.

‘That you and I are together at all is a measure of that,’ Nawn said.

‘Aye, indeed!’ Arime said, smiling. ‘Let us not be duped, as my mother was. No, this time we must not falter from the path that Raendu lays before us! Come!’

And Arime stood and led Nawn to the pavilion where the captain of the company rested. They spoke quietly to him and then, hoisting great packs on their backs and covering themselves with cloaks that hid them in the moonlight, they crept together from the camp and made their way by mountain paths into the darkness, alone.

UNDERLAND

*Dragon's realm, deep in dreaming,
Dark, delving, shadow-teeming,
Light no longer, nor any meaning,
Time a pit and space a seeming.*

-from The Book of Seven

No maps existed of that trackless part of the world, but Arime had spoken to hunters who had lived on the fringes of the wilderness there, and he had also consulted with wise men as to the whereabouts of Wenfold. That the Well lay somewhere within the Guardians was certain —now, from the other knowledge that he had gleaned from the hunters and others, Arime had been able to decide how to proceed. But it was not easy travelling in those foothills alone: their ways were steep, and the streams that crossed their path were swift and cold, fresh from the snows above, and often plunging into ravines which thundered with the promise of sudden death to the careless traveller.

On this road, Nawn at last felt himself to be of some real use. These were the first real mountains that he had seen since leaving the northern Penning, and he felt very much at home in their steep woods, their stony cliff-faces, their well-watered crags. With his help, Arime climbed above the wide valley of the Tarrabelner safely, and came through high passes into the inner kingdoms of those mountains.

But they had journeyed for many days without finding any sign of the Well, or indeed any valley into which they

might easily descend: they found instead sheer precipices falling away to distant, unreachable lakes, and tangled forests which plummeted into deep and dark crevices full of sharp stone and the sound of churning water. Eagles flew there, very high above the glistening rivers and deep valleys, but nevertheless often below the weary travellers, who looked down on them from the clouds.

The old men and the old tales told of the Stone, the Eye of Deldellu, which, standing at the top of a narrow pass, marked the way to Wenfold. But as the days passed by, they found no sign of it. Nawn wondered if it had indeed been so weathered by the ages that they would not recognise it, leaving them trapped in the mountains for the rest of the year, till winter came. He did not mind the mountains, nor the winter, but he sensed from Arime that time was precious, and, as the summer began, that time was indeed somehow running short. They clambered on, up broad faces of stone and down into narrow valleys, surrounded by the silent wilderness and the broad and empty sky.

They moved in this way slowly east, between tall peaks of frowning stone, and came to a broad gap in the mountain chain as it marched east toward the dawn, needing to descend as the land fell away from them. On both the right and left, south and north, green slopes of rippling grass swept down from the cliffs towards the plains. Nawn looked out over the hazy Middle Lands, and then southward, to the dim lands that were scarcely visible, and largely unknown, behind the mountains.

They made camp one night, many days after they had left the company, on a plateau about halfway down to the plain.

Nawn looked over its edge to see the great spurs of stone that linked the mountain on which they stood to its brother across the valley. There was still no sign of the Well, nor the Stone Eye, nor had they seen any living creature save birds and a few wild goats. Their packs had become far too light, and their spirits were low. When he tried to sleep that night, Nawn found that he could not, and he got up and strolled about the plateau restlessly. The bright new moon was just sinking below the western peaks and a chill breeze had sprung up, when he saw Arime walking across the plateau not far ahead.

For some reason he did not call out to the prince, but followed quietly behind, bringing the Sword with him, wondering if his companion walked in his sleep—for Arime seemed to move uncertainly, but with strange intention, as though looking for something in a dream. Nawn followed him through a thick band of bushes—and then gasped as he saw that Arime had stumbled upon a rough-hewn stair leading between huge boulders. He climbed up behind his quarry, and continued to climb as the stair came out higher and higher, winding its way across the face of a cliff. Soon the wind, blowing free of the lower foothills, had freshened, and Nawn began to shiver. They had left all their gear below, including their cloaks—did this stair go on up to the snow?

But he soon found that he did not need to fear that: the narrow path abruptly levelled out, thousands of feet above the plain, underneath stars which glittered so clearly Nawn thought he could hear their bright twinkling. He looked around him. Arime was ahead of him—but in front of Arime stood a large flat stone with a wide hole in it, looking south

and north. Arime had paused before it.

‘The Eye of Deldellu!’ Nawn heard his companion whisper.

But before Nawn had time to think or look further, he noticed something else. Behind the stone a light was growing. It was far too early to be dawn, Nawn thought — and besides, the light was climbing from the south, not the east— but it was a yellow light that threw strange shadows around that stony ledge. As he waited breathlessly, he saw that it was the light of a lantern, and as he waited longer, he saw that it approached nearer: it was held aloft by an old man with a long snowy-white beard, who leaned upon a walking stick with his other hand. As he approached the Stone, he halted, seeing someone there. A brief but deep silence fell. Then he spoke to Arime:

‘So you have returned at last,’ he said in a quiet voice which Nawn thought was full of ancient peace. ‘Either Bettan or I have come here every night since you left us, hoping for this sight. There is little time left, Arime. It is good to see you again.’

And to Nawn’s astonishment, Arime fell to his knees before the bearer of the lantern, and the old man put his white hand on Arime’s head.

Nawn did not move, and in the silence that followed he thought he could hear weeping, but whether it came from Arime or the old man he could not say. Suddenly, the old man looked up and spoke across the stony space, saying:

‘Who’s there? Come forth!’

Nawn stepped forward into the lantern’s light. Arime

turned to face him.

‘Welcome, Nawn, son of Maranain of Rondar, who was called Herald of Raendu!’ said the old man. ‘Your errand and place in this tale is known to me —indeed, your place here is one of honour, not only for what you have done but for what you might do. I am the Warden of Wenfold Well.’

Nawn came further forward and bowed.

‘Rise, Arime,’ the Warden said to the prince, who had remained on his knees, ‘and we shall journey down into the valley to the Well. There is much that you can tell me! But, as I have said, time runs away from us and we must be swift in pursuit if we are to claim any prize at all. Come!’

Arime got up, and they silently walked down a steep path which wound under rock and between stunted trees, hidden from the moonlight. Before long it had become a steeply descending lane between two sheer cliffs, and Nawn looked up to see stars glimmering far above. The old man walked faster than Nawn would have thought he could; the lantern light danced ahead of them, and his stick tapped on the stone as they went. With a rustle of dried branches, he had vanished behind a great, matted clump of bushes and the light had apparently gone out. Nawn followed.

Without any real sense of passing over a threshold, Nawn found himself looking around a firelit room. Around the hearth were placed deep chairs. Shelf upon shelf covered the walls, full of what Nawn imagined must be books —apart from a few that he had glimpsed briefly at Shandhall, he had never seen a book before. Here there were so many that he wondered if he had stepped into a dream.

Someone was busying themselves about the room. It was a

boy, it seemed —on seeing the Warden enter with them he ran over.

‘Arime!’ he shouted. ‘At last! You return! Did I not say that it would be this week, master?’

The Warden smiled.

‘Arime, you will remember Bettan, my companion and faithful friend,’ he said, and Arime smiled, taking Bettan’s hands. ‘Bettan, this is Nawn, companion of the Prince and Bearer, I believe, of Sundergost.’ The boy bowed deeply.

‘Welcome to Wenfold Well, and the hospitality of this house!’ he said.

‘Bettan,’ said the Warden, ‘fetch their packs from the hillside if you would. For now you must both rest here by the fire.’

As Bettan left through what was not really a door, Nawn noticed, but merely a gap in the wall, screened by thick bushes, he and Arime were guided to the fire by the old man and they sat down gratefully. Nawn looked at the two of them —it was as though some silent conversation was exchanged between them as they looked upon each other, an understanding that did not depend upon words and would perhaps have even been hindered by them. At last, the Warden said:

‘You have seen much since last we spoke.’

‘Seen much and lost much,’ Arime replied.

‘And perhaps gained much as well —for is this not Maranain’s son, and a true friend?’ the old man said. ‘But news has come to me here of the loss of Lonia. I have grieved greatly at that. I fear that you did not see the light in her till too late.’

Arime turned to the fireplace.

'I did not see any light in anything until it was already dying,' he said. 'What am I to do? Is she alive?'

'You did not come here to ask what is to be done, Arime, but to do it,' the old man said, touching Arime's arm as he spoke. 'But I believe she lives. She serves him little purpose dead.'

'Him?' asked Arime, his voice chilling. 'The Hooded Man?'

The Warden shook his head.

'Look again, prince,' he said. 'The thing you call the Hooded Man is not what it seems. I speak of he who used that thing to serve his own purposes.'

Arime looked at the Warden questioningly.

'There is so much to speak of, and so little time,' said the old man, sighing. 'We can barely pause to rest, I fear, before you must leave this place again. But you will, I think, in the end come to see more of he of whom I speak than me. I name him now, for the first time: your outward enemy is Dare-kor the Destroyer, who calls himself Dragonlord.'

Little more was said that night, in part because both Arime and Nawn were so tired, but in part also, Nawn thought, because the magnitude of what the Warden had to say was too great for one evening's speech, and the naming of the Dragonlord had chilled all further words. Nawn slept deeply in the first comfortable bed he had had since leaving Shandhall, and he awoke feeling more at ease than he could remember, until he saw Sundergost at the foot of his bed and recalled their errand and his whereabouts—but even then, it

seemed impossible to be afraid or anxious for long in that house, if house it was: each room seemed to contain peace in a different way. Silent passages, sunlit chambers, wide halls—the place seemed endless, and Nawn wished that he had time to explore all of it, and to get to know the boy better, but there was time for neither. As soon as they had risen and eaten a hearty breakfast, the Warden began to talk of their quest.

‘If I am right,’ he said, as they sat around a table in a large kitchen that morning, their packs around them, ‘then you have until mid-summer and no longer. Then I fear the worst. This time your enemy has little to lose, and still much to gain. Your mother defied him just when he thought he had her; he lost your sister even as she was heavy with the child he desired; and Baladac, his tool, is broken and disgraced. But there are more evil ways of bringing about his design.’

‘You move too swiftly for me, Warden,’ said Arime. ‘Though I have seen much, as you say, I have not seen as much as your old eyes. You told us last night that the true enemy was Dare-kor the Dragonlord of old. But I thought that at the heart of evil was the Morndred, the Dark Circle of legend. Is this not so?’

The Warden sighed and nodded.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it is so. But at the heart of a circle is its centre, empty though that may seem from afar. It is not empty. Always at the heart of things is a living being, for good or ill, and you would do well to remember that. The Dark Circle has withered over the ages, but its central roots have remained strong. Where they draw their life from, no one knows, but it must be a nigh bottomless well of

darkness. I cannot see into it. Through it, Dare-kor himself has remained alive and strong. Strong enough at least, to hope to do this deed.'

'What deed is that?' asked Arime.

The Warden leaned forward and looked deeply into Arime's eyes.

'Let me ask you this: what is it that the enemy has been trying to do now through your line and the line of the kings of Shand since before even your birth?'

Arime thought for a while. Nawn was restless—he could not see what the Warden was getting at, and was ashamed that he had not paid more attention to the old tales he had heard in Shand, for the names he was hearing were in part beyond him.

'I had thought once that it was the conquest of Shand and the Middle Lands, and all the West,' Arime said, 'but I do not feel that now. It is a darker purpose even than that. He seeks, I think, to steal souls, or pervert them.'

'I was right,' replied the Warden, 'you have learned much. Yes, a dark purpose indeed. Not the conquest of lands but the conquest of souls. In this way he gave away Sterreth to your mother, and began to gnaw at her soul through it in exchange. But what was his aim in that? What would have happened, do you think, if Ryna had not defied him at the end? What if Sterreth had not been swept to the Great Sea?'

'It would have eaten her soul,' Arime said slowly, and Nawn shivered.

The Warden nodded.

'It is difficult to take this darkness even deeper,' he said, 'but we all must look into the blackest well in the end. When

your mother's mind was consumed, what then?

Arime paused.

'Would that not be enough?' he said after a moment. 'What else could he do?'

'What did he, failing with your mother, try to do with your sister?' said the Warden.

Arime's face turned dark.

'Through Baladac —he would have had her father the evil god himself. You know these things —what is it you are trying to say?' he said.

The Warden raised his hand and smiled gently.

'Arime, I do not do this to torment you but to guide you,' he said. 'What then, do you think passed through his darkened soul when he saw through the Twisted Mirror that Sundergost had returned to the world of light, bringing vast changes in the fortunes of things? Sundergost, that had slain his god? When he failed with your sister, and all his evil shadow was rolled back by the Golden Sword from the lands of men, his own Prince Baladac disgraced, his plot in ruins, and his god dispossessed, what then would he have plotted in his vengeful heart? When such a dark soul grows desperate, would not his evil will grow stronger, more daring yet?'

'I do not understand,' said Arime quietly.

The Warden paused.

'The aim of the enemy has been to make the mortal line of Valkurn bear back into the mortal world the god Gon-runin the Usurper, bringing from the pit of blackness itself that spirit which Valkurn himself drove from its body in ages past. Would that not be an adequate revenge? To have the

slayer of the god bear him back to life?’

Arime visibly trembled.

‘But he failed!’ he cried. ‘He failed! My mother spurned him and his gift! My sister perished before she could fulfil the deed! How now does he intend to bring this about?’

‘I think you see it, Arime,’ the Warden said quietly. ‘Since he cannot now have Valkurn’s heir, he has stolen that heir’s bride. Since he cannot mate the prize with any prince of men, he must father his god himself.’

Arime jumped out of his seat.

‘Lonia!’ he shouted. ‘Oh, in Raendu’s name, no! This cannot be!’

The Warden looked at the fire, and said nothing.

Arime stood for a timeless moment frozen in horror, and Nawn saw him turn as pale as ice. But after a moment he breathed again, and spoke:

‘But I see that it is,’ he said, ‘and therefore I must bid you once more to take me to the Door, Warden. And in Raendu’s name, may this Dragonlord meet a fitting end by my hand!’

‘Perhaps he will,’ the Warden said, ‘but perhaps not by your hand. In my old wisdom, I think the darkness from which he draws his strength will in the end destroy him. But I cannot see how, nor when.’

‘But you are right. All speed must be made now —for the time of mid-summer, I guess, is the time when Dare-kor will do this deed, at the ceremony of the Slaying of the Sun, in Wormstone.’

That evening, as the sky became pale and purple in the summer twilight, Nawn found himself sitting by the Well

itself in the green and quiet glade at the heart of Wenfold. He had been brought there by Bettan, having been given a brief tour of Wenfold —but the boy had left him there, deep in thought, and gone about his duties.

Nawn's mind was full of questions: he had listened to the Warden explaining things to Arime, but was not sure if he had understood it all. He seemed again to be on the fringes of a great tale, a tale that began long ago with Valkurn, or perhaps even before that, with the forging of Sundergost in times so ancient that the solid world as he saw it with his mortal eyes had changed since. He tried to piece it all together in his mind: Sundergost had been made to defeat the Dragons, when they rose to burn the ancient east; it had disappeared beneath the earth, to be recovered in a later age by Valkurn, the greatest king of Shand, who had used it to slay Arata Gon-runin, the Serpent King. But then the Sword had been taken back, under the world, and had remained there for over a thousand years as the lands of men went from a long peace into the beginnings of war. Something large and dark had stirred beneath the Dark Isles, and now threatened to consume the light and give birth to a new night, bringing back the god Gon-runin into the mortal day.

Then Arime had come, led by the Herald of Raendu, and together they had wrested Sundergost from its pale perch — but Arime had defied the Herald, and not gone on under the earth to fulfil the quest of the Sword. Thus evil which might have been prevented had come to pass.

The dark Dragonlord, Dare-kor, leader of the Morndred, who had long plotted and brooded over the death of his god Gon-runin, drew on the hidden darkness and sought to use

the heirs of Valkurn to bring his dead lord back into the world of light by giving him a body of flesh; but Ryna, his first captive soul, had denied him, and her daughter Syra had died while with child —so the Dragonlord had taken Lonja, Arime's queen-to-be, and planned anew. So far, Nawn thought, he had all the knowledge he needed to understand the story in which he was caught —all except one vital piece: how did he fit into it? He searched through all that he had learned, but he could not see what role he was to play, what part his father had given him.

His father, a Herald of Raendu —Maranain of Rondar one of the followers of the God of Light. He felt small before the memory of his father. Perhaps, as he had thought at Shandhall, his part had already been done? Perhaps he was no more than a minor player in a game too vast and too deep for his name ever to appear in it. And yet, when he looked at the Golden Sword that he carried for Arime, and felt its weight, he knew that there was still something for him to do. And he very much wanted to see his father again, if he could. He sighed.

Wenfold was very beautiful. In the twilight the trees seemed to glow with a pale light of their own. A soft breeze blew down from the snow, but the warmth of the day lingered still in the folds and crannies of the land. He felt very much at home here, he thought, surrounded by mountains and far from the lands of the Outside —he could almost have been in some height of his Valley after a summer walk. He wished again that he was there, and part of him wished that he had never left. Stars came out above him as he thought.

The Warden, robed in white that shone around him in the evening light, came down the hillside and through the trees to him. He waited until the old man came and sat by him at the side of the Well, saying nothing. Nawn was prompted to look over the edge of the stone lip into the deep darkness below.

‘It is very deep,’ the Warden said, looking down with him. ‘As I said to Arime once, though, it is not bottomless, as the rumours and minstrels would have it. Everything in this world has a limit.’

Nawn did not reply for some time. Then suddenly he asked:

‘Warden, you sometimes speak as though you are foresighted, and you said you knew my part in this tale — how much do you know of that in which we are wound?’

The old man frowned and glanced up at the sky before replying.

‘When one has seen many parts of a picture, one may guess the rest,’ he said after a moment. ‘The more parts one has seen, the better able he is to guess the pattern —but even then, he is not always right. There may be something in the picture he has not got that he could not guess, for it belongs to that part of the whole, and that part alone. I do not know what is going to happen in the future —but much news comes to me here from the outer world, and one of my tasks is to keep a record of it all. The constant pondering of such news bears the fruit which can seem to those who do not know it to be foreknowledge. There is no magic in it, not of that sort —I will not say no magic at all.’

Nawn turned to him.

‘Then what is my part in this?’ he said. ‘I have heard the tales, and listened carefully to all that has been said—but I see no part for me to play. I found Arime in the snow, when he was called Bron; I brought him back to life, and he became Arime again, and recovered his throne. Now he goes forth on the quest that has always been his. But what of me? I remain Nawn the Woodwarden, and carry his sword behind him. I do not know if there will ever be anything else. Yet I sometimes feel as though I have been summoned forth from the Valley by my father—but to do what?’

The old man smiled, and looked at him.

‘Why should you want anything else?’ he said. ‘Do not imagine that true greatness or glory lies only in being a part of a song. The Dragons would ask, Why do mortals miss the greatness of some deeds and sing of others? They have always found it hard to understand. They are on the threshold, I suppose, between man and beast and the world beyond both, and can see with eyes that we have blinded in ourselves. But you have already done deeds worthy of song, if that is what you are seeking.’

‘I’m not certain what I seek,’ Nawn replied. ‘I do not think it is greatness, not of that sort at least. When I carry Sundergost, it seems to me that it has a weight in it, a weight which matters to me. Do you see? There remains something to be done, but I do not know what it is!’

The Warden looked at him intently, then, and clasped his walking stick between his hands. Nawn felt he was waiting for him to speak again.

‘Sometimes I do not see how my father, who I remember as a mortal man, could be the Herald of the Gods,’ Nawn

said at last.

The Warden smiled and put his hand gently on Nawn's arm.

'Nawn, you are still young. Such things tax the minds of the very old!' he said. 'But heralds of gods can be as mortal as those they serve are immortal. The cup is not the wine.'

'I do not understand,' Nawn said. 'I thought the Herald of Raendu was with Valkurn a thousand years ago. How can this be the same man as my father?'

'Not the same man,' said the Warden. 'A man is the cloth, the dress, the glove through which the hand works. That which shines within a man is the man himself, the hand that works the glove. It might be that Maranain, the name by which you knew him, is the same hand as Estran, the Herald who walked with Valkurn the Valiant; but perhaps he is a different hand, too: there are many who serve Raendu, and his light rests on one as brightly as the rest. A hand, doing the same work, comes to look like all hands that do that work. Whichever is the case, it seems clear that Maranain was Raendu's Herald, and that he heard the summons himself years ago, somehow, where he dwelt in secret in your hidden home, and then he travelled far and swiftly, and came to Kirratamon, the Haunted Wood, in time to meet Ryna, Arime's mother, and guide her to the freedom that waited for her. And then he remained in Tara, watching over Arime: a hard choice for a father, to leave his own child to watch over another's. And he went with Arime beneath the earth—and he did not return.'

Nawn wept then openly, and the Warden put his white arm around him.

‘It is hard, Nawn, I know,’ the old man said. ‘He did not come back through the Green Door—but it may not be that he is dead, at least not as the Dragons would see it. Who was it that guided Arime in his darkest despair to the Valley? Who was it that drew you from your fireside, as you have told me, to find the prince in the snow, when within moments he might have perished? If the spirit and the body are not one, but two things, as separable as a hand from a glove, then your father has not left us. He is with us now.’

But the Warden’s words touched deeper wells of tears in Nawn, releasing them, and he wept long as the old man led him inside out of the wind which had turned frosty as the night fell.

Though he rested in a deep bed that night, Nawn could not sleep—as Bron’s life had changed and become Arime’s, so had Nawn’s life fallen away and become a new life. It was as though, like Bron, he had never known himself until now. The walls and ceiling of the little room in which he had been placed seemed to glow with a pale light.

He struggled with thought after thought, but no answer contented him. What duty could be as strong as a father’s love, or stronger? Yet here he lay, drawn into the world by powers greater than he knew.

Part of him did not wish to speak to the Warden again, fearing revelation, but part of him yearned for the old man’s words: the Warden had, after all, known his father and much else that might be important. But then Arime had known his father too, and Lonia the missing queen, and, it seemed, half the world. As the dawnlight drifted in through the little

window of his room, Nawn struggled still to reconcile the turmoil of feeling that swept him this way and that.

He sat in his room the next afternoon, a thin shaft of sunlight illuminating dancing motes of dust in the air. The beam fell on the hilt of Sundergost, where it stood near the pack that Bettan had replenished. Golden reflections filled the small space.

No, thought Nawn, no, there was more to do. It was not just his father who had drawn him out of the Valley as part of a tapestry of which he was only a strand—that was not the whole way of it. Something within him which had nothing to do with his father had brought him this far, too. He would not turn back. He did not know if it was duty that moved him so, or simply that which had to be done. At that moment he could not see the difference.

The sunlight moved on and the reflections passed. He went to seek out Arime, and found him similarly staring at his pack in his own room. Nawn wondered if he had been pondering making the underground journey alone. Nawn suddenly pitied him, and told him of his decision to continue. Arime stood and embraced him, and they stayed with each other, not speaking, for the rest of that day.

But in the evening the Warden said that they must be gone the next day. He said it gently, and without threat, but they both knew that summer had already begun, and that the journey was long. If they began immediately they would barely reach the end of that road in time. The thought prompted Nawn to ask a question despite what he was feeling.

‘Warden,’ he said, ‘there is something else I don’t

understand. Surely, if, as Arime says, the Underworld collapsed in fire and water when Sundergost was removed from it, the road that we were meant to take is gone forever? Are we not journeying in darkness to a dead end, blocked by a sea of flames or a wall of stone?’

The old man nodded.

‘I also had thought on this,’ he said, ‘for I knew that Arime would one day return. But I have been watching the world unfolding beneath our feet, and have friends who have journeyed through the Green Door since Arime emerged from it. They have explored the ruins of the Underworld for months — and they tell of great wonders.

‘All that vast lighted chamber which formed a hidden domain, lit by fire in crystal, in which you wandered, Arime, has indeed vanished. But in its place is a new ocean, dark and deep, the shores of which are as yet unmeasured. It extends beneath our feet for mile upon mile, east and west. New caverns, new chambers, new secrets from the ancient world of the Dragons have no doubt been revealed by its reshaping of the subterranean depths.

‘There will be a way to the end of the road, of that I am certain. You would not have been called upon to travel this road if there weren’t. But you will find it much changed, Arime. Therefore I have prepared this for you. Bettan, fetch our gift!’

Bettan went out of the large kitchen where they all sat, and returned a moment later with a giant green roll of some kind of fabric. Bettan uncurled it across the wide floor. As Nawn looked closer, he saw that it had unfurled into the shape of a boat, woven of what seemed to be fine green reeds. It was so

light that even Bettan could carry it with one hand, but it was large enough for two to sit in. And it could be rolled up again, into a long but light pillar of green which they could carry strapped to a pack.

‘I made it myself!’ said Bettan, proudly. ‘You will not need it for most of the journey, I think—but you may find your way blocked without it, as the sea may have flooded the caverns.’

Arime thanked the Warden and Bettan, but Nawn looked on the boat with trepidation—he had never seen the sea, and had no desire to. Being on water while underground seemed a double burden to him. But he had made his choice, and said nothing.

Without further ado, the next day came, and they were led with their packs through the mountain woods to the Green Door. Nawn did not now want to leave Wenfold—it had become a second home to him—but before long they reached the cliff in which stood the strange entrance to the Underworld, and they were saying their farewells.

The Warden embraced him and looked at him.

‘My heart tells me, Nawn Woodwarden, that you will find both what it is that you feel you must do and that which you most desire behind that door. You will see further than even my eyes have seen. With the gift which comes with great age and much knowledge, I say to you listen carefully to the words of Dragons. The Sword-bearer may be the bearer of Hope, as well.’

Nawn said nothing, and could not look the Warden in the eyes. Bettan shook his hand.

‘When you come again, we can share tales,’ he said. ‘Your

people are from the same part of the world as mine, though they were sundered from them long ago. Farewell, Nawn! Remember the light above!’

Nawn nodded and muttered a farewell in return.

The Warden then opened the Door, and addressed them both.

‘Now do we see the beginning of the completion of a long journey and a hard quest. The Sword Sundergost goes to do what may be its final and its greatest deed. Raendu watches your road, in ways that we cannot guess. Through darkness may you come to his light in the end! Farewell!’

Arime then raised the Golden Sword, unsheathed, above his head, and in that bright morning light it shone like a fire. Then he turned, and, followed by Nawn, he went over the threshold and into the darkness.

Always they went down —down, down, until the rock grew chill to his touch and the air frosty, and their breath, had they but light to see it, grew misty.

Nawn felt his eyes never again could be wholly bright, but would forever encompass darkness. Here, far beneath the petty lands of men, lay the foundations of the world, the primal stuff from which the mountains themselves were forged, the ancient rock from which Raendu’s World was built in the Dream before Time. Here, in the blackness, he heard sounds echoing in the limitless voids, sounds of water falling, strange sounds of wind moving through spaces invisible, and he shivered, and felt himself a trespasser in territories foreign to his soul. And he imagined the scene around them: vast caverns dripping with cascades of water,

ceilings hanging with star-encrusted gems, window upon window opening out to other and yet other caverns, tunnels, halls, whole worlds of unknown and unseen splendour, all dark, all empty of living things, or perhaps not so empty, like the abandoned palaces of alien gods, still haunted by inconceivable phantoms. Here light was an intrusion, a fantasy of the mind. As they went on, deeper and deeper, Nawn began to wonder what the world above would be like without light at all —and then, as they went even further on, he began to forget what light was, and the sunlight and stars seemed to him a feverish dream, unreal and lost and dimmed in his memory by an unearthly distance of time and space.

There came a point long after all talking had ceased, when Nawn realised that they had not been keeping track of time. They had fallen into an unspoken agreement of stopping when they were tired or hungry only, and neither knew how many days, or maybe weeks, had passed on the surface. In fact, a peculiar change was occurring in them: they no longer felt that light or time had anything to do with them. Weeks or months could have passed by on the surface without it making any difference to them; the rising and falling of the sun was no longer of any significance at all. In that deepest of darkneses, Nawn began to feel that his own understanding of time had been wrong; he began to see that watching the sun to measure the days had grown into an instinctive thing since childhood, but that it had concealed something that he had lost, perhaps so long ago that it had even been lost to him in his mother's womb: a sense of life and time that was linked to the beating of his heart and the quiet flowing of his blood, and had nothing to do with Arime, or the outside

world, or light, or anyone else.

At first, to Nawn, this was an evil thing, though he somehow lacked both the energy and inclination to say anything about it to Arime. All that mattered was to keep going, onwards, downwards, until even the reason for the journey was forgotten. And still they went on, and down, and though it grew no colder, nothing else changed.

There came a time —Nawn could not say when it was— when something did change, though.

Firstly, almost imperceptibly, their path levelled out. Neither felt any need to communicate this to the other —it was simply a fact, which both knew as they walked.

Secondly —and this was so strange that Nawn at first thought he was imagining it— he began to see things.

It was another unusual effect of being in such a place that neither of them felt any need to speak. Nawn would have expected this to be the opposite, and that the darkness and the endlessness of it all would have compelled them to talk to each other simply out of fear, but this was not so: as they went on, talking became less and when it had altogether ceased they found how unnecessary it had been. Nothing occurred for them to talk about; when they slept, they seemed to sleep at the same time, and they woke at the same time; neither, after a while, was afraid of being left behind by the other, as Nawn felt might be the case at first. Meals were always the same, always cold, always too little —there was nothing after a while to complain of, nothing to comment on, nothing worth speaking about. Thus, when he began to see things, he had almost forgotten that speech was a faculty he could use. It was almost as though, in not using it for so long,

he had discovered another way of conveying to Arime his thoughts or feelings, not, as Nawn had imagined, by somehow 'speaking' with his mind, but through silence itself—as though in some way by not attempting communication at all he was in fact communicating everything that was needful.

Seeing a faint greenness in front of him, then, Nawn found no need to comment on it. It was simply there. Arime would see it as part of its being there. Nor did the fact that he was now seeing something after such a long time of seeing nothing at all strike him as unusual either.

The greenness grew from what could barely be called a light into a definite bright spot—bright as far as his underused eyes were concerned, though it was actually, he guessed, extremely dim. It was green still—a trail of green, which lay at their feet as they walked. The Green Way, thought Nawn. It reminded him of voices and things he had nearly forgotten. This was the way they had been told to follow then—the way through to their destination. What was their destination? He could not remember. It did not seem important.

Then came the time when they reached the shores of the sea. This was not as Arime remembered it, Nawn knew, but this was the Underland since the turmoil caused when the Sword was removed, a world greatly changed. The furled boat that they had carried was now essential, and they loaded their gear into it and set off across the surface of the dim water. As they went—who knows for how many days they sailed?—Nawn noticed that the green glow that he had seen on the walls of the caverns was slowly transformed

around them into a witchworld of light, streaking the stone with colours beyond his imagination. It hovered above them and around them, entrancing them. Nawn was spellbound.

‘Wha-what is the light?’ asked Nawn at last when he could bear the wonder of it no longer. His voice was like an ancient memory stirring in sleep.

‘Dragonfire,’ said Arime simply, as the boat sailed on. And it hung down around them, from thousands of feet above, like the great brushstrokes of an underground god, the strokes he had made when the world was first envisaged — and except for the tiny ripples that their boat made, the water was perfectly still and the reflection of the red and green light fell away beneath them like an almost bottomless void until at times it was as though they floated in a sphere of light. All around the tracery of glowing stones was the embracing fist of darker rock, so that they seemed to sail into the heart of a smouldering coal from a fireplace, but a coal which seemed large enough to hold the sky and all its stars. Nawn would never again look at stars, he thought, without thinking of that glorious cavern, where the heart of the earth strove with the sky to master beauty itself.

Again, he did not know what length of time passed on that forgotten water. They ate quietly, the boat moved on silently, gripped by a current which was either below the surface or magical, for it did not disturb the jewelled mirror which the water formed throughout the immense vault. Whether it was soon, or many days later, however, he felt the boat speed up. Glowing rocks by which he marked their position against the line of the cave’s wall travelled to the rear more speedily. They came to a point where he could see

that the vault around them was curving to his left —he had no idea what direction that was on the surface, but imagined it would be north-east. They swept along, following it. By now, Nawn thought, they would have passed under the overbearing weight of the vast sea above, and were sailing on a different water in a different world, beneath the Dark Isles themselves.

Thus Arime, Nawn thought, crossed the threshold where before he had paused and turned back —and now they were journeying on to a true unknown, the road that he had not yet walked, that he had been afraid to walk, the road beyond Sundergost. The eternal darkness closed around them.

MEETINGS IN THE DARKNESS

*Then Valkurn said, voicing his thought in
That vault of stone, Yield yourselves to me,
Dwellers in Darkness! And deep went that
Voice, drowned in the depths by dark shadows.*

-from The Song of Valkurn

Nawn lay in the bottom of the boat and tried to sleep as they were swept along through the strange world by the invisible current. Arime stood over him. In the dim light Nawn could just make out his friend's face. He could not describe its expression: he wondered if he looked the same. The journey under the earth had emptied Arime's visage of mortal feeling—but it had not been left empty. That great darkness, and its stillness, its weight, its enchanted lights, had filled his companion's eyes with something akin to joy, but not the bright joy of the surface world. Perhaps this was what Dragons' eyes were like, Nawn thought—eyes that saw more than light, or beyond light and darkness. He sat up.

The immense cavern was still all about them, but the constellations of light above and around them had changed, and Nawn knew that the cavern had narrowed, and that the current was moving swifter. Where, in all this darkness and wonder, he thought, was his father?

He thought he could hear something, too—something on the very edge of hearing. They had often heard things, below the earth—grindings of rock, rushings of water, echoes of

winds in vast vaults that had never seen the sun. This sound, he now could tell, was the distant roar of water pouring over a precipice. It grew nearer. With a sudden chill, he realised that they were being swept towards it by the current. Arime had had the same thought, and began paddling to the side to escape from the grip of the water, but, though they slowed after a while, seeming to find a less swift part of the stream, they still moved relentlessly towards the sound, which had now become loud. Thousands of tons of water plunged over some dark cliff ahead into unknown depths. Nawn trembled, not only with fear, for it had also become cold in the cavern, and a mighty wind rushed through that cathedral of stone, buffeting their boat like the leaf it resembled until Nawn was certain they would capsize.

But somehow they kept afloat, and soon the roof of the vault fell sharply before them until it seemed to Nawn that they were rushing at a sheer wall, glistening gold and green. The water, however, was sucked under the wall by the forces of the current. A space, no more than the height of a standing man, opened up at the wall's foot, and into this they plummeted with little hope of stopping or even slowing themselves. Here, the roof came so low that Nawn had to crouch down below the edges of the boat, huddled with Arime in a bitter cold as the huge sound engulfed them. Then the stone ceiling lifted a little—but their speed increased. There was less light now, and in the dark Nawn slung his pack and Sundergost in its scabbard over his shoulder, tightening all the straps, certain that soon they would either plunge over the falls ahead or have to abandon the boat to avoid them. Arime likewise strapped on his gear

and peered ahead, but there was nothing to be seen: blackness pervaded the air, and if the wind had a colour in that deep place, Nawn thought, it was surely ebony.

Suddenly, everything changed: where he had been crouching in the bottom of the flimsy boat, gripping its sides, he was now floating in space, the boat gone from under him. It had happened so quickly that he could still feel its smooth surface in his fingers—but there was nothing there now but dark space, then a mounting wind in his face. He knew that he must be falling a long way, but in the darkness he could see nothing to tell him so. He realised that in a few moments he would reach the bottom and be smashed to pieces on the rocks or drowned in thundering water. His body, he thought as the air rushed by, would never be found. At least, he went on to himself, he would not need to be buried—how many thousands of tons of stone would lie over him already? But all these thoughts came to him in less than a second: with a force like a slap from a giant's hand, he was submerged in something and lost consciousness briefly. Then, after another timeless second had passed, he found himself floating in water, water that rushed and tumbled about him, but which was not as bitterly cold as he had expected—he wondered if some vast subterranean fire warmed even that immense sea. But he could get no grip on anything, and was pushed under again as the current rolled him over and over.

He tried to cry out; he had no idea what might have happened to Arime. But every time he tried to shout his mouth would fill with water, and there was so little air that he was having to use it for breathing, desperately gasping it in as he raced through the darkness. With a sickening smack

he felt himself hit a stone wall, and he blacked out again, fighting to come back to life. But the world around him was just as black as the unconsciousness into which he kept slipping, and he felt very faint and weak.

'Arime!' he cried out faintly at last, but the boom of the water drowned out his voice. He struggled, and his hands met something soft like mud or sand. He pulled at it, and the current suddenly thrust him up into the air and down upon the surface of it. It was a rough bank of stones and silt, hard and painful to his flesh, but it was out of the water, and in a few moments he had dragged himself completely clear.

He lay there breathing and hurting for some time, too weary to do anything else. Then, when he found he couldn't move for the pain of his bruises, he wept a little. It was still very dark, but the darkness was filled with sound: rushing, crashing water nearby, water that plunged endlessly into itself from some high, unseen place. There was no sign of Arime.

After what seemed like a day, during which time he hovered on the edge of a painful dream, Nawn tried again to move and found that he could crawl to a higher place. His pack and the Sword were still strapped to him, and he managed to eat a little of his dwindling stock of food, cold and soaked though it was. After that he felt much better, but still very weak and dazed. He called out in the darkness, but could barely hear his own words for the thunder all around him.

The torrent, as far as he could tell, lay several feet in front of him, the falls to his right—but how high they might be, or how deep the water before him, he had no way of knowing.

He could not even tell the shape of the cavern into which he had fallen, whether its roof was low or high, or whether it was more of a tunnel into which the sea they had crossed was channelled by the immutable stone. Stone was all around him though, of that he was certain, and he began to tremble as he thought of the thousands of tons of rock that lay between himself and the outer world. He might as well be dead, he thought, so well-buried was he. But he could think of little else for long but Arime —the prince might be lying bleeding nearby, or he might have been carried on by the stream and be miles from him. Without Arime, Nawn thought, I am lost —but likewise, he added to himself, without himself, Arime was alone in the dark, weaponless. He cried out again, louder this time, and thought he heard a response, but it might have been only a dim echo above the roar of the water.

Nawn sat down and tried to think. He had no idea of the way, and was not sure whether Arime had had either —they had trusted to the Warden's words and to faith. But that had separated them now, and they were surely doomed, he said to himself, unless somehow the right road could be found. Arime did not have his sword with which to protect himself, Nawn thought again, for it was strapped to his own back — not that either of them needed a sword, he went on: they had neither met nor seen any life in those dark places. The Underland was dead, not a place for living things at all, at least not living things as Nawn knew them. He shivered.

He gradually began to perceive also, as the time crept on, that he was badly bruised; he had not noticed for some time, either, that his knees and forehead were deeply cut and had

been bleeding. These wounds had closed, but they had left him weak. Even if he had known the way, he felt as though he would barely be able to walk three yards without collapsing. He decided to wait where he was until he had at least recovered some strength. Then he would set out to find Arime in the darkness, and beyond that he dared not think. He drifted into unconsciousness, knowing that he was close to death.

'Oh Raendu,' he said to himself from the edge of sleep, 'they say my father was your Herald. They say that you guided Arime to me in the heart of the winter, through your Herald. Then send him to me now, I beg you, for I am done—and I would see him again, if I may, before the end.'

But, as his eyes closed, he could hear nothing but the thunder of the plunging sea, nor see anything but blackness.

Therefore it was very strange to him to find, on waking, perhaps hours, perhaps days later, that there was light around him. He was standing in a green space, and the bright green glow from its walls and roof and floor was quite bright to his long-darkened eyes. Ahead lay a patch of deeper green. He wondered if he were dreaming, but then realised, from the pain in his legs and the cold of the air that he must have walked in his sleep, somehow stumbling far from the roar of the water into this strange place. He collapsed and sat on the floor.

As the minutes went by, his vision grew clearer: this space was like a garden. The roof above was not the sky, but glowed brightly as with some memory of it. In the centre of the garden was a pool; from the heart of the pool rose a fountain, taller than him, its water falling, falling with a

gentle, mesmerising music.

Wherever he had come, it was indeed far from the roaring water. No air moved in it, and it was quite warm, though Nawn shivered in his damp cloak. He ate the rest of his food—the last morsel of it—and sat for what might have been a few moments or a day, he could not tell, entranced by the gently falling fountain. His mind was empty, and, had it not been for the pain in his legs and the bitter cold, he would have concluded that he had died indeed, and waited to meet Raendu. Even the pain and the cold felt distant, as though they belonged to his body, but not to him.

As he waited, thinking nothing, he looked at the fountain, and thought he could see the outline of a man there, behind its tumbling water; he shielded his tired eyes from the light—there was someone standing there, twelve or so feet away, looking at him. He could not make out the figure's face. He wondered if his ordeal had brought on madness, and he saw no more than a vision of death. The figure did not move or speak. It was taller than Arime. After several timeless minutes had gone by, Nawn spoke:

'Who are you?' he said, his voice trembling. With a peculiar sensation, as though it was someone else feeling it, he realised that he was afraid, and was trembling.

'He whom thou desired to see,' said a voice in the High Tongue—a familiar voice, Nawn thought, but he could not remember to whom it belonged. Another long silence went by.

'I do not know who that might be,' Nawn said weakly. 'I had thought that I might be dead. Are you the Herald of Raendu, come to fetch me from beyond the grave?'

‘Indeed, I am, but it is not yet time for thee to join me,’ said the figure, and he stepped forward.

Nawn saw a man before him, dressed in grey and white, with red hair streaked with silver, a grim, deep face —and a patch over his right eye.

Speech and movement both failed Nawn. Tears of both fear and joy swelled up in him. After a long while he found the breath to speak:

‘Father?’ he said. ‘Is it really thee? Or do I wander in some dragon’s dream beneath the earth?’

‘Both, Bralwain, who art called Nawn,’ said the man. ‘It is I —and thou dost wander in the realm of the Dragons of old, which is built on dreams. My son —I have waited long to see thee stand before me again.’

Nawn clambered to his feet and took a few steps forward, but the one-eyed man held up his hand.

‘I would embrace thee, father,’ said Nawn.

‘Come no nearer,’ the other said gently. ‘I cannot embrace thee. The arms with which I could hold thee burned long ago. This is but a fashioning of light, a phantom painted on the air —but it is I nonetheless who am its painter. That thou art able to see me at all signifies that thou art not far from the Gate of this world, which is death. I have waited for thee, Nawn, my son, though I did not know with certainty if thou wouldst come. Would that I could hold thee again! But the choices of mortals have taken us apart from each other —for a little while. Speak! Ask what thou wilt of me —this time that we have together is precious, and slips by fast.’

Nawn staggered to his feet, then slowly sank to the floor again. He was weeping, and his mind swirled. He felt very

weak, and wondered how much time had passed beneath the earth since he had been parted from Arime.

‘I —I cannot speak,’ he said after a while. ‘I cannot find words.’

‘Then let me help thee as best I can,’ said the other, and he raised his hand again. ‘Look into the Pool —for I must show thee something in its waters.’

A silence fell in the passage, and even the sound of their breathing was drawn away as though it had been extracted from the very air. Nawn closed his eyes, and reality rippled as though it were suddenly a tapestry blown in a summer breeze, and then he drew nearer to the water and looked into it.

Though he could see his reflection standing there, a bright summer sun shone in the sky above, and there were trees all around him, full of life. His father stood by him, young and strong as Nawn remembered him best, his beard golden, his one eye shining. It was as though he stood by the Pool of Kaela, far away. His father was speaking:

‘Nawn,’ he was saying, ‘know thou that from beyond time thou art loved: I love thee as a father and more than a father, and behind that love lies the light of the world, and behind that light is the Fountain that spills over Raendu’s Dream and fulfils all hope. Remember that. Throughout thy life, let thy strength be that love and the loves that grow from it and around it as the Wood Before the World grows about that Fountain. It is stronger than stone, warmer than fire, swifter than water, deeper than the sky.’

‘Father,’ he said, ‘I love thee. I missed thee so much when thou had gone. Why didst thou leave?’

His father smiled gently.

'It was not easy for me to leave thee, Nawn. When I met your mother and settled in the Valley, I had thought that at last my road had ended, and that I might be free from the future, from all duty, and all care. My mortal eyes saw happiness about me, and I was content. But such contentment is not eternal, and can never be so.

'Raendu calls us all, my son, and he calls all the time. He would not have us dwell in a false contentment.

'I heard his call, and I knew, once thy mother died, that I could no longer hide in the Valley. There was a road to be walked, and as I had chosen to be the Herald, so I must walk it first. I left thee then, and went forth to where I was needed in the world of the flesh. And now, by a long path, I wait here, divested of that flesh, to greet thee again at the end.'

'Where are we?' Nawn asked. 'I remember toppling over water in the dark...'

'You have come to what remains of the ancient land of Malamirne, which fell beneath the sea an age ago. This was the garden of Kaela; these were her waters. She blessed waters all over Gandria, beginning here, in the heart of her own realm.'

'What of Arime?' he said. 'Is he alive? And what of his quest? Can thou tell me anything of that?'

His father nodded. The water shone brightly in the sunlight. Nawn looked into its depths again. Rapidly, the sunlight was rolled back, and a different scene lay before him through the glittering surface.

'Arime lives,' his father was saying, 'and at this very moment, as thou wander in the passages of stone far beneath

the earth, he has climbed the deadly stair, and been taken into the heart of evil. It is of him that I am to show thee. Look!’

And Nawn saw suddenly a huge chamber in the water, filled with firelight, larger than the throne-room at Shandhall, far bigger than any room he had ever seen. His father went on:

‘What thou seest is what happens this very moment in thy mortal time: through the little power that is left to me, I am revealing what I can of what is. But what is to be is beyond my power, as thou may come to see.

‘Watch! For here is the Firevault, deep at the roots of the fortress of the Citadel of the Four Winds in Wormstone, behind all its locked doors and secret ways. Deep it lies from the surface of the world, but it is far above us. Here is the home of the Morndred, and the one who leads them. Here is the secret of his power, the Dark Fire from which he draws his life, the heart of the evil, cloaked even from me.’

As Nawn watched, he could make out in the dim chamber the flickering red walls arching far overhead above a huge circular pit in the middle of the floor. In this pit, a great fire burned, its flames occasionally flaring upward toward the far-off ceiling. Nothing moved in that place but for the reaching fire.

‘But where is Arime?’ Nawn asked breathlessly, for he could see no sign of life.

‘Wait!’ said his father. ‘Thou seest things as they are — Arime has at this very moment been captured and brought there. What thou art about to see is his final meeting with the Hooded Man, and with Dare-kor the Dragonlord himself.’

'But he will perish!' Nawn cried. 'He does not even carry Sundergost! For the Sword is with me! We were separated in the Underland, and I called out to him, but he was lost.'

'Indeed, my son,' said his father, 'and he wandered long, looking for thee. But in the end he came to the stair that climbs to the Citadel that lies above us now, and he was taken by Shadowed Men, and put in chains. But do not fear! For remember this: Dare-kor is terribly afraid of Arime.

'Think on it: the Dragonlord fears and hates thy prince more than any other living thing, perhaps. For it was Valkurn, Arime's father of fathers, who slew Valasne the Enchantress, Dare-kor's queen; it was Valkurn who slew also Arata Gon-runin, the Serpent King, Dare-kor's god. And Arime himself smashed the Twisted Mirror with which the Dragonlord ruled many minds over the sea, showing them darkened visions; and Arime is the son of Ryna, who took Sterreth and then defied Dare-kor's will, casting his greatest treasure into the water and walking free. Though he holds Arime at the centre of his own realm, think not that he does so with an easy heart —say rather that he trembles with terror when he looks on his captive. Watch!'

Nawn turned back to the Pool. The scene had changed. He could see tiny figures moving about beyond the flames. As he stared, he saw that one of them was Arime. He walked between Shadowed Men, loaded with chains; he looked weary and wounded, but his face was grim and firm, and a bright light reflected back in his eyes from the fire before him. He was half-dragged to the edge of the pit. Then Nawn heard a great voice speak, and it seemed to him that he was standing in the chamber beside Arime, hearing the vast echo

of that terrible voice:

‘Unchain him!’ it said, and the Shadowed Men took Arime’s bonds from him. He stood there, freed, rubbing the life back into his arms, dressed in the rags of his travelling clothes, red in the burning light.

‘Where art thou, King of Evil?’ Arime shouted into the heated darkness, speaking in the High Tongue of the poets and warriors of old. ‘Art thou so afraid of me that thou wilt not show thyself lest I see thee tremble?’

Nawn marvelled at his friend’s courage—but then he felt Arime’s grim despair, and saw that courage was all that was left to him, and that in that dark place it was as well to put a brave heart forward as to appear craven, for death waited anyway. He wondered if, through some magic of the Herald his father’s, he was feeling into the heart and mind of his companion—it did not matter, he thought. He would still have felt so, magic or not. He wanted to go to him, to bear his sword to him as was his duty, but he could not. He watched and listened.

The darkness beyond the fire was shifting. Huge, black tapestries that had seemed like the stone of the walls rolled aside. A pale light showed from beyond them. There stood a dark figure, at least twelve feet tall, crowned in black. Nawn could not see its face. It did not move, and was as heavy and dim as the walls themselves, but Nawn knew that he was looking at the form of the Dragonlord, Dare-kor himself. Coldness itself seemed to emanate from that shape. Nawn swooned, and saw that Arime staggered back. Tears came to Nawn’s eyes—it was unfair! It was so terribly unfair! Was Arime to be sacrificed to this evil shadow? Was there to be no

justice?

He turned to his father, who stood calmly by the side of the Pool, looking down on him with a steady, unreadable face.

'Watch!' said the one-eyed figure, and Nawn turned back to the Pool.

Once more he was at Arime's side in the dim chamber. Arime had recovered himself and stood boldly forward.

'Come forth, demon of evil,' he said in a great voice, 'and we will see who shall prevail! Then I shall force thee to yield the Princess to me!'

'Fight not me, but my champion,' replied the black shape, still unmoving, and his voice echoed around the space above the dim burning of the fire in the pit. Nawn saw something emerge from the shadows. He gasped—it was another tall and dark figure, but this time Nawn recognised that it must be the spectre that Arime had met before: the Hooded Man. Cloaked in deep shadow, it seemed to hover across the floor towards the prince. Instinctively, Arime reached for his sword, but with a terrible anguish Nawn saw him realise that Sundergost was not there. He would fail in his duty—how could he bear the Sword to his prince in time? His own hand gripped the scabbard of Sundergost where it was strapped to his own back. The Sword was separated from its prince by thousands of feet of cold stone. Nawn could not even turn to plead with his father. He had to watch the scene unfold below him.

The Hooded Man drew near. Nawn saw that, several feet away from Arime, by the side of the firepit, two other swords waited, their points embedded in the stone floor. The

Hooded Man approached them and took up one. Arime took the other. They faced each other across the dark chamber.

An immense silence fell.

Nawn felt that he was witnessing something that had been long-prepared, but whether by Dare-kor or the Herald he knew not. As the two combatants faced each other, Nawn thought of all that he knew of Arime's life —his boyhood in Tara, his journey to Restonia, his ride to the Haunted Wood. Arime had told him all as they had ridden south, and as the memories which had been lost to him came flooding back: he had spoken of the Carthog who had pursued them, and of his journey through the Green Door —and as that dark road had been walked, so this dark moment had been approached.

But Arime had turned back, spurning the advice of Tarazion, and so fated himself to reach this dark chamber alone, without hope. Nawn reached out to him: if only he were not merely watching through some phantom window. If only he could lend Arime strength; if only he could call out to him and let him know that he was not alone; if only he could give to him Sundergost, whose very name meant Hope. But he was trapped in a dream or a vision, and he could only watch.

'Fear not,' came his father's voice above him, 'for there is another reason that Dare-kor should be afear'd of his captive: Arime is strong. He has faced his shadow and emerged into the daylight. Look again!'

Nawn peered into the Pool: the Hooded Man and Arime were circling each other cautiously. Now that they were together, the dark shape did not seem so tall, Nawn thought, and Arime looked fresher than he had been, and more alert.

Nawn held his breath.

They came together, blades clashing. Nawn heard the ring of metal against metal as though he were there. They struck again, then fell apart, matched in strength and speed, it seemed. The huge fire flickered. The crowned man beyond it did not move.

Again they clashed; again they fell apart. Each was getting the measure of the other, Nawn thought. In a way, it was a fairer fight than Arime's battle with the giant Turgalin Balar, for the Hooded Man now in truth seemed no taller than Arime. But it would be a harder contest in other ways, he realised, for it was fought in the pit of the Lord of Dragons, and in its victory or its loss lay death.

The Hooded Man slashed at Arime's feet; he leapt over the blow and dashed to the side, out of reach, coming back with a blow of his own which was parried; then again, the dark figure moved, swifter this time, but Arime parried the strike in turn. Back and forth the silver blades flew: if only Arime had Sundergost with him, Nawn thought again—surely this was what the Sword been made for? Surely this was the end of the Quest, and its final battle? But it was useless to think so, for the fight went on, and there was no way for Nawn to get the blade to his prince. He watched as the fighters swung and swept, back, forward, back again, twisting and turning in the darkness, weaving, thrusting, parrying. Nawn did not know how long he watched, but with every stroke, he could see Arime grow wearier, while his opponent grew stronger: it was only a matter of time before Arime was slain.

But then Arime's sword struck through the black robes and the Hooded Man fell back, wounded. A new light came

suddenly into Arime's eyes.

'So!' he cried out to the crowned figure behind him. 'Thy phantom has flesh this time! He bleeds and can be hurt! Then it is a fairer fight than I thought, and mayhap my sword will be the swifter!'

But Nawn, whose heart had leapt to hear his prince so triumphant, nearly fainted next: for the chamber echoed to an evil, reverberating laughter that chilled his soul to the core. No words were said, but no words were needed—the crowned figure was not shaken by Arime's challenge. Nawn wondered if his father had been correct—how could Darekor truly be afraid of Arime? But he returned to the fight.

The Hooded Man had leapt forward, sword flashing, recovering from his wound—Arime, chilled perhaps as Nawn had been by the laughter, stumbled. The blow struck, biting into Arime's shoulder. He cried out, and swept himself aside, but Nawn saw the blood seep through his ragged tunic. He struck back, but his blow was parried. Again and again he tried to strike the hooded shape, but to no avail: each blow was brushed away.

They both fell apart, exhausted. Weariness of the spirit as well as the body could be seen in Arime's eyes, Nawn thought. The face of the Hooded Man he could not see.

They fell to it again. They seemed so equally matched: blow traded for equal blow as they fought on. Suddenly, though, a sweeping curve of Arime's sword caught the other's hood, and it fell back.

Arime, looking on the face he saw there, staggered back.

'Syra!' he cried out—for peering back at him was the visage, Nawn saw, of a beautiful woman, her face wan, her

eyes blue, her bright hair flowing. It was as though the face of a young moon had come to rest on the dark robes of a warrior. The chamber waited as Arime stared at her. Nawn knew from the name that this was Arime's sister—but had she not died, Nawn thought, falling from the battlements of the High Houses of Tara far away? Who was this then? A spectre, returned from beyond its grave? As Nawn watched, breathless, Arime recovered himself. He looked intently at the shape before him for what seemed like a long while. Then he spoke to the Dragonlord in a strong voice:

'Send me thy true champion, my lord. This is no living servant of thine—nor is she an enemy of mine. Once, indeed, I feared her, and held her to blame for all my woes, which is no doubt why thou send her shape against me. But I learned the truth, and abandoned my folly: Syra was my sister, and I blame her no longer. Indeed, I pity her, and wish she were here now that I might speak with her, and make amends for the harm I did her. Yea, though it will be beyond thy dark heart to understand, it was I who harmed her, not she me: for I did not see her pain, and I did not speak to her as a sister before it was too late, before she left her own path and walked into shadow. I will not fight her. Thou must seek elsewhere for a foe for me.'

And so saying, Arime put up his sword, and Nawn gasped—for the whole room trembled, as though a quiver of rage or fear passed through it, shaking its foundations. The crowned figure still did not move, but Nawn sensed its deep displeasure.

The figure that was Syra pulled up its hood, and its face vanished. It came at Arime again, and again they fought,

sweeping and striking back and forth. Again Arime was wounded, again he struck at the figure before him: but its face was no longer that of his sister. In one deft movement — though Nawn could tell that he was reaching the outer limits of weariness— Arime leapt forward and plucked the hood back again from his opponent's face.

Arime paused again, for the new face on the dark warrior was also familiar to him, Nawn saw.

'Thou seekest deeper in my mind for thy sting,' Arime cried out, 'but not deep enough! This is the face of my mother, the face that haunted me for long, the face that I had thought loved me not! But thou seekest to weave thy web from threads that will not serve thee —for I know the truth here also, and my mother loved me. It was my own choice which turned my heart against her.'

Nawn looked at the figure standing opposite Arime, and saw as he saw: a very beautiful woman again stood there, but this time her hair was white, and on her brow burned a shining gem. She looked on Arime with blank eyes. He spoke to the crowned man across the firepit:

'And thou art doubly false to show her brow thus adorned! For Ryna turned from thy path and spurned thee and thy Jewel! Sterreth lies in the sea, and Ryna walks free — and so do I, from the shadow of her soul that thou sought to place there!'

Suddenly, as he said these words, but with a drowning thunder which almost deafened Nawn, the flame in the pit leapt up, filling that chamber with light, burning the air. Arime leapt back from the brink of the pit just in time, but his face was scorched nonetheless. Nawn felt the wave of wrath

that went with that fire, and he shook with fear himself. Arime huddled on the ground as the huge flames subsided. Gradually the black silence re-emerged from the shadows — the crowned shape still stood unmoving, silhouetted against the pale light.

‘Thou hast failed, Dragonlord,’ said Arime, in a strong and calm voice, holding his wounds. ‘For, as I have long thought, this Hooded Man of thine is but a shadow drawn by thy sorcery from my own thought, and he walks with whatever face thou choose to set upon him. But thy evil magic has been thy undoing —for I have walked through the shadow of my own soul, and already looked upon these phantoms, and known them. And I am free from them, knowing that it was I who made them, not thee. Thus does thy champion fall, and thus dost thou stand revealed as a master of nothing.’

But a deep voice echoed from the darkness, saying:

‘Look again, slave!’

And Arime turned to look, and Nawn with him: and their bloods froze. For, rising out of the wreckage of black gown where it had fallen when the fire roared rose another woman, this time free of the dark cloak and hood which had hidden her. She was slender, and also beautiful, her red hair bound in many braids about her shoulders, but she was dressed as though for a wedding, in long flowing robes —save that these robes were black, and evilly cut, showing her pale flesh beneath. And her eyes burned with the firelight, and her look was one of intense wickedness, as though some spirit of evil lived in her and looked out through her eyes in hatred and delight. And she smiled in that wickedness, and raised up her sword, its blade still dripping with Arime’s blood —and

Nawn knew, in the same horrible instant that Arime knew it, that this was the Princess Lonia.

Arime stumbled back and fell to the ground, moaning.

The woman came forward. Nawn saw where she bled from the wounds that Arime had inflicted —this was no phantom or illusion then: this was really the living flesh of the captured princess. On her brow, written, it seemed, in blood, was an evil sign, the sign of Gon-rinin the Usurping God.

She came on, and Arime crawled backwards until he reached the stone lip of the firepit. He could not speak nor hardly breathe.

The evil voice rang out from the shadows again:

‘Midsummer has come, my dark and fiery beauty,’ it said, ‘yet one stands forth who would forbid our wedding day, and turn the promise of its delight into ash. How do we deal with such rebellion?’

‘We slay it,’ said Lonia, in a dark voice.

‘How do we slay it?’ said the voice of the Dragonlord.

‘In the fire,’ said Lonia, stepping forward so that Arime leaned out over the edge of the abyss. Nawn looked down with him into the flames —they seemed to rise from a great distance below, their furnace heat buffeting the air. Nawn saw the pale terror in Arime’s eyes, the shock, the pain. Where he stood, by the Pool, or in some other dream on the edge of death, Nawn wept, and, reaching behind him, he pulled out Sundergost and held it tightly.

‘No,’ he said through his tears, ‘no, it cannot be! By all that is good, and just and bright —by all that is loved and that loves in return— how can this be?’ He turned to where his

father stood, anger rising within him so fiercely that he would have even struck out at that beloved form in his anguish—but as he looked he saw a river of tears streaming from his father's one eye, and he paused and swallowed his own grief.

'This happens, then,' he said with difficulty. 'This happens, even as we speak?'

The Herald nodded.

'Even so,' he replied, his voice calm. 'Yet do not despair, even yet—for all the power that I have, and all the power that lives in the world and serves Raendu its god, is bent on that scene that you see, and would burn the very fabric upon which time is woven to reach Arime at this moment. Watch!'

Nawn turned back to the water, and never with more effort or with such a sense of helplessness did he turn. He looked into its depths.

They were still there: Arime on the edge of the pit, Lonia standing over him, the unmoving figure beyond them. Then Arime breathed deeply and spoke:

'Then slay me if thou wilt,' he said, and his voice echoed in that place as deeply as the crowned man's had done, such was the power in it, 'but my spirit, though it should burn for an age of men, shall never believe for a single instant that this which stands before me is the true Lonia, or that she has forgotten our love, which came before the dark bewitchment in which thou hast caught her. She is no traitor. And nor am I. Even should the unthinkable become real, and she deny me, beyond the boundaries of all that is good and true, I will not abandon her soul. Even though thou hold her captive in thy dungeon, and she bears thee thy evil god as a child, I will not

forget her. I will return for her, for I love her. In Raendu's name, I love her, and that can never be denied!

Then something began to change before Nawn's tearful eyes.

A great silence fell over all that chamber, and nothing moved—but Nawn felt that a struggle of wills was taking place, grander and more fierce than any conflict of swords: instead of blood spilling from wounds of the flesh, light and dark bled invisibly in that silence. Whose wills battled there, Nawn did not know, nor did he know how long that silence lasted. Abruptly, perhaps only a moment, perhaps an eternity later, it was over.

Lonia's sword dropped to the ground with a clang. She trembled violently. She fell back and then swooned.

Arime struggled to his feet and went to her, holding her close. He looked into her eyes. There, very deep, very dim, but bright, like the most distant star in the heavens, the Lonia he knew was stirring. Arime wept. Then he turned to where the immovable figure stood beneath its crown.

'Slay me now, Dare-kor, and her with me, for neither she nor I will serve thee,' he said. 'We are children of Raendu, and we love him, and he us. Try as thou might, thou shalt never extinguish the light of that love, for it is beyond thy comprehension.'

The flames in the pit were subdued, sinking very low. Nawn shivered as he watched that chamber fill with darkness. Then the great voice spoke again. slow and icy calm:

'So be it,' it said—and from the shadows, innumerable shapes emerged, surrounding the couple as they crouched,

bleeding, together.

Nawn could not see how they would now live.

THE SWORD SUNDERGOST

*The Great Worm groaned, Great will be the deeds
Of this Sword, and it will serve with strength
The sovereignty of men, even thy
Line of long-awaited lords in time—
But its greatest deed will be in the
Service of Dragons.*

-from The Song of Valkurn

The surface of the Pool rippled suddenly, and the images beneath it were gone. Nawn turned to look at his father. They were back in the green, glowing garden, somewhere far beneath the Citadel. Nawn's wounds and his great thirst and hunger came back to him in a wave of life and pain, but he paid them no heed.

'No!' he cried. 'Don't take away the window to them now. I want to be with them!'

'And so thou must be,' said his father, 'and swiftly, if thou can. But thou art near death thyself —thy flesh is weak, and the way to them is blocked. A great night falls between where we stand and where they lie in peril of their lives. I cannot see into that darkness, nor have I ever been able to pierce its black veil. It has always waited at the end of this road, hiding all certainty. Something very large dwells in it, but whether it is good or evil I cannot say. If thou wouldst reach them, thou must go through it to them.'

'But thou wilt be with me?' said Nawn.

The one-eyed man smiled.

‘Nawn,’ he said, ‘in truth I have never left thee —but all my power in this world is fading. Drink therefore of this water, and quickly!’

Nawn looked where his father pointed, at the shimmering fountain.

‘Dragonwater,’ his father said. ‘It will restore to thee the life thou will need! Do not drink too much! For it was not meant for mortals!’

Nawn stooped and drank thirstily. The power of the water was like a meal —he trembled as he felt it course through him.

‘Now that thou dost withdraw from the edge of things, regaining mortal life, I am left at the Gate, and looking into thy world has become weariness itself,’ the one-eyed figure said. ‘So it had to be, and because of the choices made, I cannot be with thee in flesh. But love brought us thus together beyond flesh, despite those choices, as it ever must, as it will again. Because of love there is now still Hope. But thou must go, swiftly! Or they will die, and the Dragonlord will have extinguished the line of Valkurn from the world. Go!’

Nawn reached out to the figure before him, but it had already faded, and he could see the green light of the garden shining through it.

‘But father!’ he cried out, weeping again. ‘What am I to do? Father!’ Nawn shouted through his tears.

But he was gone, and Nawn was alone in the garden, and the world, and all its people, its dramas, its battles and its fires, was dead, and he stayed there alone with his sorrow.

But, though he did not wish to move ever again from that

spot, Nawn thought of Arime and knew that he must go on, and quickly. Painfully, he clambered to his feet. The garden still glowed with light, and, having no clear idea where he was, he stumbled down it, carrying the Sword as he went. There was a white gate ahead of him, and beyond that a stairway, curving upwards. He began to climb.

He did not know how long he climbed, or how he managed to keep going, for though the dragonwater had given him new strength, it was a long way and each stair became a torment in the dark. After what seemed an unbearably long time, during which he had been climbing steadily upwards, he stumbled forward into a vast chamber which immediately swallowed all the light that had been around him.

He stepped out into it, walking straight ahead. His only thought, dismissing all others, was how to get through to Arime and Lonia. What he would then do, he did not know. He hurried on, leaving all traces of light behind him.

The cavern seemed very large and cold, but its floor was flat, and he did not fall or stumble. As he went further, he began to feel as though the darkness was swallowing him. Indeed, as he went even further, this idea chilled him. Had he walked into the open jaws of a huge beast, not a cavern at all? He paused.

Cold silence and gloom surrounded him. He felt insufferably, hopelessly alone —the feeling descended on him like a cloud. Solitude — perhaps the solitude that comes just before death.

But something in the darkness flung that notion back at him. With an even more terrible feeling, he slowly began to

perceive that he was not, in fact, alone. There was something—someone— with him in the night. Was he imagining it, or suffering from his lack of food and the heavy burden of his shock and grief? No, the darkness said. Whatever thou perceive me as, I am here. Nawn froze. What had his father said? A great darkness lay just ahead. He reached out into it with his thought. He could not sense his father with any mortal sense, but he trusted his heart, and went on.

It was very cold, and quiet. He walked some way further, the pains in his legs stabbing him. There was a chill wind in the cavern, he thought, but then it went as he thought of it. No, there it was again—a mighty wind that blew, then stopped, then blew again. With a dread that crept through his bones, he thought of the black darkness which he had been told lay at the end of the road, and how it held something unknown, but something living. In the same instant he realised that the wind was not wind at all, but breath.

This was that darkness into which his father had not seen, he said to himself. And the living thing was here. But what manner of creature was it?

Beast, came the answer.

And was it good or evil? he thought. But no answer came. The certainty that something brooded on him from that night grew on him as he stood, though, until he felt he could speak to it. He waited, unsure of what he should, or could, do. The wind breathed on. Whatever the creature was, it was huge beyond compare to breathe such a breath.

He felt then that that great beast had seen him, and looked on him with eyes that were more than a beast's eyes, though he could see nothing at all in the impenetrable gloom. Then a

slow realisation followed the last, taking shape from half-imagined thoughts until it coalesced into something: here was something vaster, older, wiser, perhaps, than anything living in the world above; one of a race which had dwelt longer in darkness than there had been light on earth, a race born in the night before Raendu dreamt of the world that Nawn knew. It was a terrible, cold vision. In it, humankind were as the blades of grass at a man's feet as he walks, unthought of, irrelevant, infinitesimally small. He saw that it might regard him as he regarded a mote of dust, swirling in the light from a window.

And yet, as he stood there trembling before whatever it was, there was some kind of recognition too, as though a leviathan at the bottom of the sea had for the first time seen the surface of the ocean and was curious about the play of light on the waves. Nawn dared not move or even breathe. For what seemed like an eternity, but may only have been minutes, the great unseen night looked at him, and the world stood still.

But though the world around him stood still, strange things began to happen in Nawn's mind. If he had been wiser, or more learned in ancient lore, he thought, he might have known what was taking place, but he was not—and the night that stared into him began to unravel the strands of memory there, and Nawn felt his whole life spin past him in the blackness of the cave. It was as though the beast was not simply viewing him as he stood there clothed in his mortal flesh, but all of him, from the moment he had been born to the moment he had walked into the tunnel—and perhaps beyond, for Nawn saw pictures of a terrible fire, and a

horrible fall, and other things he could not make out, and certainly could not remember. They were visions, perhaps, of what was to come. It all happened very quickly. Then he was again looking at that black darkness in which sat the unglimped eye of something in its pool of dark fire.

There came into his mind then a sound like a mountain of sliding ash thundering into a stony pit. It was not a voice, and no words were spoken, but Nawn felt that the beast in the darkness was communicating something to him. He tried to hear the words. It was not that the thing was weak and struggling to speak, he felt, but rather that it was so strong that it would crush him if it misjudged what it said. To communicate to him, Nawn thought, it must be as though he were trying to talk to an ant.

Nawn remained frozen and silent. Nothing moved, and the great eye in the night, Nawn was sure, did not blink.

Then Nawn knew, as clearly as if he had seen it by the light of day, that the great invisible beast, whatever it was, was bound by mighty chain and collar in the darkness. It was tethered there as a bear might be tethered. It was helpless.

'How so?' he wondered. And just as suddenly it came into his mind, as clearly as pictures that he himself might think, that it had been chained there long, long ago as part of an evil enchantment. Images flashed through Nawn's mind at bewildering speed. He did not understand them, but from them he guessed that the great beast had been somehow tricked in an ancient time, and had been trapped ever since.

Nawn trembled. Parts of shadow that he had thought were the walls of the cave he now saw might be part of the creature, its body coiled vastly, around the darkness and out

of sight. He was surrounded by the bulk of the darkness, and it was living.

‘I came on an errand,’ said Nawn to himself, remembering Arime and Lonia, and stepping cautiously back—but he realised that he was a long way from the stairway he had climbed, and even if he ran there would be no hope of ever reaching it before being either pounced on like a mouse or swallowed like a fly.

‘Fear not, mortal,’ said a great voice in his mind, clear now, and speaking almost as though it used a mortal tongue, though Nawn’s ears heard no words. ‘One who has walked the Green Road will not perish by my breath or claw. For thou hast passed through the realm of the Dragons of old, what remains of it. Would that I could return there ere I perish from this world.’

That raw speech without words that was the foundation of all language, as the crust of the earth supported the land, formed in Nawn’s mind around a core of meaning.

‘Wherefore art thou chained like a common beast, O Creature?’ asked Nawn, aloud, wondering at his own voice—where did his courage to speak leap from? he wondered.

‘Know ye I am held by a chain, and the chain which holds me is enchanted, and that while I lie helpless here, beneath the earth, the power that is mine, the strength of the last of my race which is my heritage, is stolen hence from my very blood, moment by moment, to be the tool of a mortal who calls himself a Dragon-lord.’

Nawn was then compelled to leap backwards, for the creature’s thought seemed to burn him, intense as a star burning suddenly beneath the earth, shooting out to the wall

of the cave in a terrible, booming, silent echo. After a moment, the unseen thing had passed, and the creature went on.

‘No mortal should be the master of Dragons. But he uses my own strength and blood against me, and holds me here to draw away my might. He knows he cannot make me do his will, but he can steal my will away. Only a Dragon’s tooth can sever the chain that binds me, but I am the last of the Dragons, and all my teeth are broken and gone. Therefore I rot in the dark, alone, while he prospers.’

Dragon! The word—or the thought behind the word which had echoed in him—rolled from the darkness through Nawn and beyond. He was speaking with a Dragon! He almost swooned, and the whole dark world swayed invisibly around him. Then he returned to awareness, still standing in the vast, cold cave.

There was a long silence.

Nawn now thought he could hear the slow, rumbling breathing of the Dragon in the gloom. After a long time, he wondered if the beast had indeed fallen asleep or whether it watched him still from its unseen eye. He began to slowly edge away.

The Dragon considered him further. Nawn felt as though a chill wind were passing through his soul, and he froze to the spot. Then, with a clarity that startled him, three distinct, undeniable words formed in his mind.

‘You carry Hope.’

A cold silence, almost solid, so that the air of the chamber itself seemed to grow as cold as ice, gripped him. He could feel the vast, dark intellect of the beast thinking its dark

thoughts before him. He wondered where in that inky blackness was its eye. What did its words mean?

Then Nawn suddenly thought of the Golden Sword which he carried, held hidden now beneath his cloak, and he had no doubt, in the same thought, that the Dragon knew of it and knew its lineage. And, rushing into his thought like a stick borne on a flooding brook, there came other realisations.

Was not the Golden Sword made of a Dragon's tooth, as the tales told? And, if this were so, could it not then sever the chain that bound this beast?

Nawn was trembling. He felt the weight of the sword beneath his cloak, and he understood. It was the Sword of Hope: that was what it had been called by Valkurn, long ago, when the Dragons had given it to him. They had said that its greatest deed would be done in the service of Dragons.

In that moment he said aloud its name:

'Sundergost!'

From beneath the shelter of his cloak, Nawn now brought out the Golden Sword. It shone in the cave as though it had a light of its own. The Dragon did not move, but kept looking at Nawn. He knew then that the beast had seen the Sword before, and that it was not upon the blade that the beast's gaze fell —what was important now was Nawn himself, and what he did next.

Nawn was in terror: for in all the tales he could recall, Dragons had done great harm to the world, and had been the curse of the ancient lands —and yet had not the three greatest of them given this very sword to Valkurn, High King of Shand, ages ago, in order that he might save his kingdom?

But what had this to do with him? Why was he here, and not some other? He was not Valkurn, nor his heir, but a Sword-bearer only. Every impulse in him told him to flee for his life.

But all of this was swallowed up in the eye of the Dragon. He had not meant to come there, but he had been meant to come there—in all the ages, of all the roads to walk, destiny had brought him to this spot, armed with the only thing that could break the spell that had been laid upon this, the last of the great worms. Nawn was indeed no hero, he thought, but he had arrived where a hero should have been but had failed to walk—and he wondered whether this was not so of all the great heroes in all tales. It was later that minstrels made them heroes.

There was no escaping what he was supposed to do: even though he could not see how he could possibly wield the blade with enough strength to sever that mighty chain, it was clear that that was what the beast, and destiny itself, expected. Yet should he? For it surely meant his own death, and maybe the death of many others if this Dragon was free to roam the world. Was not this beast the very source of Dare-kor the Dragonlord's power? Now he saw how fitting that title was—how Dare-kor had proclaimed the secret of his power in his very name. This creature should not, surely, be released?

But the idea came into his mind—he was sure it was from the Dragon this time—that there would be no question of release into the world of light. The body of the beast was now so huge, it told him in its silent speaking, and the bones of the mountain so intertwined with its vast bulk, that were it

but to move more than a few yards the whole caverns above would collapse in on it and bury it forever. It did not want the freedom to roam; it just wanted freedom, even if that was followed by death. Whether or not Nawn would perish in the earthquake which followed, it did not know. Nawn thought of the pictures he had seen when the Dragon had first looked at him, unravelling his life: fire, falling. There was no certainty what these meant, but they seemed to lie in the future.

Why should he do this thing? he asked himself, almost speaking aloud.

There was no answer, not even from the Dragon. But as the silence grew, he thought he felt something grow with it. Very slowly, with only the beating of his heart to measure time, he tried to look with his father's eye, with the eyes of the god Raendu.

It did not take him long to see what was there.

One look into that pit of darkness in which lurked the Dragon's eye and he glimpsed the ages of agony that the beast had endured, trapped beneath the earth, its strength drained by sorcery. He felt the anguish, the awful hopelessness, the endless, impenetrable darkness. He collapsed to the ground under the weight of time that had passed without hope, the eternal emptiness of despair. And he knew what was needed.

The Dragon was asking for mercy. And he, a mortal from the other side of the world, was being asked to show it. He was the bearer not of a Sword, but of Hope.

He knew what he must do. He silenced any other voice in his own head. The deed must be done. There was no one to

ask here, and nothing further to ask —perhaps he would never see anyone else again, but that made no difference, he saw that now. He was the one who had to do that which was to be done.

He looked at the tunnel, and tried to measure in his mind how quickly he could run, and wondered whether the roof of the smaller cavern behind would remain safe —but it was useless, there was no way of knowing. He had to do the deed without certainty.

The Sword Sundergost felt remarkably light in his hands. It seemed to glow with a fire of its own as he lifted it up. He could see suddenly very clearly now in the darkness where the black chain lay —a huge metal thing, at least three feet thick. He could not see the body of the beast.

He had no idea if one stroke would be enough, but without giving himself time to think any further, he walked quickly over to the collar, right under where he imagined the Dragon's eye peering down upon him, and he lifted Sundergost over his head, muttering a prayer to Raendu.

He swung the golden blade with all his strength.

The Sword Sundergost came down with a ring of metal upon metal, and a boom, and whether because of some enchantment or because the metal of the collar had worn down over the ages or for some other reason, the collar was severed at a single blow, and sprang apart. There was a tremendous flash of light, and a wave of such force as must have made the world, and a rolling, ominous thunder, and Nawn was hurled backwards into the reverberating night.

When he recovered himself, it was perhaps only a moment

later—but the world had changed. At first he dared not open his eyes, for he knew that something lurked beyond them which he had not seen for a very long time:

Light.

It gleamed there, through his eyelids, in a warm embrace, but he was afraid of it as though an old friend had returned after so long that he seemed a stranger. But after a few moments he did look, and he saw a great wonder.

The cavern was full of light—not the dim, green light of the rocks, not even the growing green of the garden in which he had met his father, but a bright, golden light, brighter than firelight. It shone out from before him, and back into the cavern as far as he could see.

But that was not very far, for the impossibly huge bulk of the Dragon lay between him and the empty space he now realised he had wrongly thought lay all about him when he had entered the cavern. The light came from it.

It was hard for him to describe what he saw, even to himself. It was not possible, he thought, for any living thing under Raendu's Star to be that large and still live. But Dragons, he realised, were part of the Underworld which had never seen the light of that star—indeed, their release into the upper world had been something Raendu had not wished. They were part of a different world, a different order of things, a dream of a different kind.

It began only a few paces away from him. He had been blown backwards, he saw, but was still near the collar and chain which had tethered the beast: they lay before him, broken, seeming no stronger nor larger than a single strand of hair against the vast, glowing shape behind and above

them. That such a chain could have held such a beast seemed now incredible. Walls of fire-golden flesh reared up above those broken links like cataracts of living, golden water; ridge upon ridge of scaled muscle curved up and away into the depths of the cavern; curve upon curve twisted in the red light until all reality was full of Dragon, until the foundations of the world itself rested upon the shoulders of this beast. So vast was this creature, Nawn saw, that it had intertwined itself over some unimaginable period of time, with the rock in which it lay: the stone walls of the cavern, and its many upward-spiralling columns, were barely distinguishable from the body which had grown to fill that vault. Long must the beast have been fed, Nawn thought, trembling, to have grown so huge. He wondered fleetingly what the captor had fed his captive over the centuries, but turned his mind from that subject rapidly.

Not knowing much of dragonlore, Nawn had only heard the slightest of warnings about looking into the eye of a great worm. When he remembered the warning he had already looked. It was above him, as large as the dawn sky, and as full of light as the sunrise in it. He was its captive before he could feel fear; he stood up under it, still holding Sundergost, and saw the face of the beast take shape around it.

The head was like the out-thrusting spur of a mountain: jaws that seemed made of stone jutted from its huge skull, but though the great maw glowed with bright red light, it was toothless. That did not prevent Nawn from imagining, however, that it was full of thousands of swords like the one he was holding, sharper than steel, glinting from the smiling mouth. That the mouth smiled he was certain at first, but as

he looked he saw that to measure the expressions of a Dragon by those of a mortal visage would be a grave error — the term ‘smile’ had no meaning here. All he knew then was that the Dragon held him there, frozen, bound by the spell of its eye.

Fire dripped from its jaws; light shone from its scaly skin; its nostrils burned like furnaces; but the thing which captured all of Nawn’s soul after a few moments was the great eye.

He could see only one eye —the other was on the other side of that vast head, lost to him— but one was enough to unseat him from his own mind. It rolled with light and fire, and in its glowing depths was a dark slit, still and cool in the burning light, looking at him and absorbing his entire soul. The dreams of other worlds swam there. Nawn passed from what he had considered to be ordinary existence as he stood looking up at that window, and time snapped and burned like an insignificant twig in a forest blaze. But then, from somewhere over the edge of the horizon of all things, a voice came to him, speaking not in words but in thoughts, and he listened.

It was the Dragon’s voice.

‘Go,’ it was saying, ‘I release thee as I released he who came before thee; take the tooth of my fathers and go.’

Like a raindrop that suddenly splashes to earth and finds itself changed, Nawn returned to the world of ordinary thought in an instant and realised that barely a few seconds had passed since he had opened his eyes, and perhaps only a few minutes since he had severed the collar. In that time the Dragon had returned to life and burned with living power.

‘But what of thee?’ he stammered. ‘What wilt thou do?’

‘I go to finish the burning I began long ago,’ said the Dragon. ‘Behold! Thy way is yonder! Go with the blessing of Dragons!’

Then a great noise filled the cavern, and Nawn realised two things: firstly, that it had become overwhelmingly hotter in that space since he had first entered it, and secondly that the Dragon was breathing —inhaling in a mighty thunderous wind which sucked at Nawn’s cloak and made him stagger back unwittingly. Then the beast turned its massive head — Nawn felt himself swaying, as though he stood on the edge of a cliff as it gave way— and it exhaled.

Thunder cracked; light flashed; sudden heat smote Nawn in the face. Fire, like tendrils from the sun, roared from the Dragon’s nostrils and smashed into the wall of the cave some distance away. Nawn cowered down under his cloak, certain that death would strike him swiftly now —but the sound died, the air cooled, and he had seen a tunnel there, its walls still shaking and glowing with the firelight, stretched away into darkness. He turned back into the light of the Dragon’s eye.

‘Go!’ roared its voice, and Nawn stumbled away as the impossible began to happen around him.

The Dragon began to move.

Nawn watched as it looked up. Following its gaze, he saw the immense ceiling of the cavern sweep upward to a point far overhead. The beast raised itself on arms that seemed larger than mountains; Nawn saw claws that would have felled whole forests in their flexing as the beast strained upwards; slowly its vast bulk arched towards the ceiling of

stone; and then Nawn felt the trembling of the earth all around him, saw the clouds of dust falling and swirling, and realised that the entire cave was about to collapse.

Gathering what remained of his wits, he ran for the tunnel that he had glimpsed. He reached it just in time. As he stepped over its threshold dust and darkness descended around him. He ran on, noticing that he was weeping intensely; he felt the tremendous shaking of the rock all around him, and fell several times as he went, until after a few moments he emerged into a broader space as the light faded into blackness once more. But, with the last remnant of the dragonlight from the cavern behind him, he began to think again: he saw before him the briefest glimpse of something resembling a stair, and he stumbled towards it as the mountain around him trembled. The Dragon had given him his own life in return for its freedom—but, as darkness descended totally now, he wondered whether he would live another hour. And suddenly he thought of Arime and Lonia—his father had sent him to find them, but that seemed like an age ago. Were they alive or dead? He ran on, and began bounding up the steps in the dark.

Lonia remembered the face that was looking down at her: she had seen it long before, in a dream she had once had, before the world became dark. It was hard to think of the name, though, the name that went with the face—its eyes were dark, its hair raven-black: it was a good face, she thought, and wondered suddenly at her thought. She had forgotten good faces. All the faces she had seen had been so evil. She had been tormented by them for so long that she

had become like them, she thought to herself —to have any kind of life in that lonely and terrible place, she had been compelled to be like her torturers, to dress as they had instructed her, to dance in the moonlight as they had taught her, and to bow before her lord as she had been shown. But by becoming like those around her she had not found hope, only a kind of dark delight in her despair. She shivered. What had happened to her?

The face was calling to her, a name she had long forgotten: Aspithell she was, Shadow of the God, not this name that the face used. But no —there had been another name, before Aspithell, and Ungaelle, and Sha-barcoth, as they had called her: a name unlike all of them, that brought with it memories of another life. Perhaps she had lived before the life she now had; perhaps she had been a princess in some other land. She imagined a golden sword, and tall castles, and wide forests. Yes, there had been another life. What had her name been then?

‘Lonia!’ called the voice that went with the face. She looked at the man who was staring down at her. He was the man who haunted her dreams, she realised, the man at the bottom of the well who got smaller and smaller as the night clutched at her. She shook herself. He held her now. He was near her. She awoke and said his name:

‘Arime.’

She looked about her. They were in a huge chamber, so vast that it might have been an open space but for the stone ceiling that leaned in above them. Fire raged in a pit in the middle of the floor. She had been here many times as Aspithell, she knew, dancing before her lord. But she was

Aspithell no more, nor was the dark one her lord any longer: she was Lonia, Princess of Restonia, and she was with Arime, her prince.

Shadowy figures moved around them, coming nearer. She sat up.

'Arime!' she said, holding him. 'Oh, Arime, forgive me, please forgive me!'

'What is there to forgive?' he said, smiling grimly. 'We both lost ourselves in the darkness. But now we are together again at the end.'

He kissed her brow, and she felt warmth and life come back into her —and with it came memory and awareness. She knew that she had been enchanted; she saw the months of captivity, the terrible journey across the wilderness from Shand, the cruel voyage across the sea bound in chains, the horrors of Wormstone: and as she peered into the night around them, she knew that they were surrounded by Shadowed Men and other unspeakable, slithering creatures, and that they were going to be burned in the pit. She looked across the fire. The tall shape with its dark crown stood there, unmoving. It was at the heart of her nightmare. She stood up with Arime's help.

'Listen to me, Dare-kor,' she began in a weak voice that became stronger as she went on, 'and know that thou hast failed even with me —for I utterly reject thy darkness, and I will not wed thee. Here is my prince, and we will die together rather than be parted again in thought or deed.'

But the dark shape did not reply. Great coldness and fear swept around that hall, she felt, fanning the flames to a great height. She tried to steel herself for death: she had yearned

for it now for a long time, wishing only that she might see Arime again. But then she had succumbed, and lost herself before the onslaught of shadows. It seemed fitting in a number of ways that she should perish now, by Arime's side. He gripped her arm as the enemy's servants drew nearer; they stank of death.

Then the great voice boomed out at them from the depths of the hall:

'Thus dies the line of Valkurn, most rebellious of the mortal kings. Long and cruel shall be its burning, and mighty shall be its suffering, in recompense for the great harm that it has done. In the firepit shall the bodies of its children smoke and wither, and in my realm shall its final spirit be tormented.'

Lonia felt the night-creatures at her back. She looked at Arime —there was no need for words: she could see the pain, the grief, the long exhaustion, in his eyes, as well as, glimmering deep, the triumph and the love. She loved him. All else that she had suffered was suddenly and completely eclipsed in that love. She saw the sword that he still gripped in his hand.

'My love,' she said quietly to him, holding him, 'we should find a swifter death than burning by that blade, and so cheat this evil creature of his final delight.'

Arime nodded, his eyes unmoving from her face.

'I love thee, Lonia,' he said.

'And I love thee, my prince,' she answered. He raised the blade of the sword to her heart.

Then, even as she saw Arime tense his arm to thrust the point into her and end everything, there came a great

thunder and the chamber shook. The flames that flickered from the firepit went down, then abruptly flared up, and dust fell from somewhere above them.

‘Do not falter, my lord,’ Lonia said. ‘It is some trick of his, to deny us our own deaths at the end.’

Arime was looking around.

‘No,’ he said, lowering the sword, ‘no, I do not think so.’

Lonia looked across the chamber to the shadowy figure — she had never seen it move, she realised, and it did not move still, but she had seen its eyes glow in an evil malevolence, and they glowed now, far across the chamber, she thought — but not with the red malevolence that she had known: they burned cold, like ice. The Shadowed Men and other creatures that had crept up behind them had withdrawn with the shaking and the noise. As it continued, growing louder and louder, with more dust shaken from above, they fled altogether, wailing. Lonia grabbed Arime’s arm and circled the great pit in the middle of the floor until they came nearer to the crowned man. She could see clearly now —yes, the eyes were white and pupil-less, shining she knew not whether with fear or hatred or something else.

‘Come forth, Dare-kor!’ she shouted above the growing noise. ‘Come forth from the shadows and let me see thy face!’

But whether it was because Lonia had not the power to summon him, or for some other, more sinister reason, nothing moved. Then a greater wave of violence shook that whole chamber from its floor to the heights of its distant ceiling, and Lonia and Arime were thrown off their feet by it. A great wailing went up from the recesses of the chamber where the Dragonlord’s servants lurked; thunder rocked the

air. Lonia staggered to her feet —she could remember, she realised, the pattern of that palace, and, grabbing Arime’s arm, she made for a broad arch to the left.

Yet, even as they approached it, a cry went forth from some dark corner of that place that froze their blood and brought them to a standstill: a scream, or shriek, of some damned soul, it seemed, had torn the air, and the crowned man had moved.

Even as Lonia watched, her heart stopped, the tall dark figure toppled, so slowly that she believed time itself had slowed, until it struck the floor and smashed into a thousand pieces.

With a shock which seemed to echo around that place as the noise of that toppling echoed, Lonia realised that what she had thought was Dare-kor had been no more than a statue, a false form, hidden in darkness and shadows. Now it was gone. She glanced at Arime. His face was pale, but he gripped the sword in his hand tighter.

Then, with a roar which drowned all other sound and thought, the fire in the central pit burst from its boundaries and scorched the ceiling, sending tendrils curling like the fingers of lightning bolts through the burning air until the whole cavernous space was charged with flame. Lonia and Arime collapsed, cowering beneath their own hands, as all sense and order seemed to flee from that place.

The roaring continued for what seemed an eternity —but Lonia knew that it had been only a few moments when she dared to look out from her hands again. Arime was looking up too.

Fire spat and fell all about them, and heat cascaded

through the air, scorching them, but their eyes still saw it: far above them, its huge neck emerging from the flames of the firepit, was the immense head of a Dragon. It ignored them—they were no more than sparks in the general inferno of that hall—and spoke in a great voice, that, though her ears could not hear it above the noise, Lonia felt echo in her mind:

‘Come forth, Dare-kor!’ it said. ‘I come to complete thy burning!’

Nawn emerged from the doorway into the fiery vault that lay beyond it. He had bounded up the stairs, dismissing hunger and weariness, forgetting thirst, thinking only of Arime and his princess trapped in the darkness. ‘They should not die; they must not die!’ he had repeated to himself as he flew upwards: the stair had wound and wound in a great, lightless spiral up from the tremendous noises and fires below, up into the unknown. He had known then that he was very close to the Firevault, the vast chamber under Wormstone which he had seen through the window of the Pool that his father had opened for him—but an age had passed since he had seen Arime defy the Dragonlord, it seemed, and he was terribly afraid that he might be too late. What he might achieve when he reached the vault, he had not thought—his duty as Sword-bearer was to deliver Sundergost to its true master, and if death followed that, then so be it.

Now he stood on the threshold of turmoil itself. Even as he had climbed, the stair had rocked and cracked beneath him as the mountain through which it led convulsed. Now, as he looked out into that space, he saw why.

The great Dragon, that he himself had freed with Sundergost from its ancient bondage, reared out of a pit of flame, towering over a room full of red and golden light and furnace-heat. Tiny figures moved below. He heard the beast's summons to the Dragonlord in his mind. He felt as though he were welded to the doorway in which he stood; waves of heat washed over him; stones and dust crashed around him. He watched as a huge tapestry, so grey that it had seemed to be part of the wall, fell to the floor in a rush of fire. Beyond it there was another, paler light, he could see no sign of Arime or the princess.

As he watched, flames roared up and about the Dragon. Its golden scales burned with it, but the fire did not harm it. To Nawn's eyes, the fire and the Dragon were like parts of one thing, and the ravagings of the flames were like the fury of the beast. As they consumed everything in that chamber, and as Wormstone itself shook to its foundations as the mountain on which it was built began to collapse, Nawn knew that the Dragon's death must also be near. He thought of the vast body that curled about the caverns beneath, and how, in movement, the beast would bury itself—but it would have vengeance first. Well could he believe that Dragons dwelt, as some tales told, in the valleys of the sun.

Called by the Dragon's voice, unable to resist its command, out of the darkened shell into which it had withdrawn, came the wizened figure of a twisted, crippled man, already in an agony of motion, it seemed, already scorched and black to look upon, its bony fingers clutching at a staff as it hobbled painfully down the stairs. Such was the horror of that sight that something in Nawn wanted to feel

pity —for he knew, even as that feeling welled up in him, that this was Dare-kor himself, in his true form, summoned from the shadows by the Dragon, and that the form he wore was not of his own choosing, though he may have thought to use it at the last to draw from the heart of his enemies that pity from others which was perhaps his last chance to escape death.

‘I come to complete thy burning,’ the Dragon had said. Nawn saw then that, ages ago, when Dare-kor had sought to make himself master of Dragons, he had been burned beyond life itself by the beast’s fiery breath. It was the burning blood of the Dragon which he had stolen that had kept him alive thereafter for so long. And here indeed was the answer to other mysteries: how had the Morndred been able to extend their dark hand so far into the realms of men, reaching through mirrors and guiding evil phantoms so far away? How had they been able to see so much that lay beyond mortal sight, to hear so much that was beyond mortal hearing, to know so much of the movements and doings of men? Through the power of the Dragon. This had been the living thing at the heart of the darkness which even his father had not been able to see into. Living from the blood of Dragons had made Dare-kor strong indeed.

But it was not his own strength. Only a thin, black chain had stood between his power and his utter ruin. Freed from bondage, the Dragon had reclaimed its own. Dare-kor was to be left with nothing —the last vestige of power and life was to be taken from him.

Nawn watched as the spider-like shape of the twisted man crawled down the steps to stand cowering before the huge

beast. He did not know if any further words, or thoughts behind words, were exchanged between worm and man—all he saw was the Dragon opening its massive jaws to breathe the flame of absolute damnation upon the creature before it. Mercy was not familiar to the mind of the worm, Nawn thought—only retribution.

He knew then that with that blast would come the final destruction of the chamber in which he stood. Already flame and stone fell all around him in cascades of death. Where was Arime? He peered into the turmoil. All the Shadowed Men and other servants he had seen scrambling about in the fires had long gone. But there, against the white and red fire behind them, he saw two tiny figures. He called out to them, but his voice was drowned in the general thunder. He saw that he still held Sundergost in his hand. Gripping it even more tightly, he plunged out into the heat and chaos and went to them.

They had both been overcome by the heat and were badly burned, almost swooning with it. Blinded by the white-hot light himself, he grabbed Arime's arm and shouted out to him. He did not know what words he cried, but the prince came. Falteringly, side-stepping crashing rock and crackling fingers of flame, all three returned to the doorway through which Nawn had come.

Though he knew that it was perilous beyond measure, Nawn felt Arime pause at the threshold and turn to look back. Lonia turned with him, and Nawn followed their gaze. There, before a final curtain of fire fell between themselves and the beast, they saw the Dragon's jaws stoop down and breathe white flame upon the withered man before it. A

terrible howl, like death itself, echoed above even the thunder of that breathing.

‘Thus perishes Dare-kor, who dared to call himself Master of Dragons,’ muttered Arime.

They stumbled out and back into the darkness as the archway of the door collapsed. They ran down a long, dark passage that seemed cool and silent compared to the Firevault they had left, though its walls trembled, and they emerged after a short while in a darker space. Dust fell in sheets to the floor as the whole fortress shook.

‘This is the end of Wormstone,’ said Arime, coughing, ‘but how this comes to be I have yet to realise. Nawn, is it truly thee? Dost thou bear Sundergost to me at last? I had thought thee lost in the waters of the underground sea! How come thee here?’

‘My lord,’ said Nawn, ‘by enchantment and Raendu’s grace, not by any skill of my own.’

‘It is good,’ Arime said, taking Nawn’s hand, ‘and I can see that the very stuff of legend and the food of minstrels lies about us here in thy deeds as well as ours. But they may never know the truth of it! For, my most beloved friends, I fear that here, beyond all light and hope, we have come at last to the end of the road.’

Nawn went to kneel at Arime’s feet, but half-collapsed there. He recovered himself and presented Sundergost to the prince with a bow of his head.

‘Then let me discharge my duty, my lord,’ he said, holding back tears, ‘and bear to thee the Sword Sundergost, which is rightfully thine.’

‘I wonder, good and kind Nawn, dearest of friends,

whether it is so rightfully mine. The Dragons who gave it to Valkurn said that it would not be by his hand nor by his children's hands that Sundergost's greatest deed would be done. But I will take it from thee, Sword-bearer.'

He took Sundergost and its scabbard from Nawn and bound it to his waist, turning to Lonia.

'Bear witness my love,' he said to her. 'This is Nawn Woodwarden, of the Valley of Vorandor, who rescued me from the snow and who followed me through the night of my soul until day dawned again. He, above all others living, shall be welcome in our halls, should we ever see them again.'

Nawn bowed to Lonia, but was unable to get to his feet. Lonia went down on one knee to him.

'If thou art the one who saved my beloved prince, then I am grateful beyond measure to thee,' she said, 'for in saving one life do we not save many more that we do not know? But I fear that the evening of our lives has now come, and we will never see Shand again. Even as we speak this very mountain in which we stand is breaking apart, and is ready to sink into the sea. Let us then find what shelter we can and await our deaths. And may we trust always in Raendu, who has brought all of us through the darkness to each other, even at the end.'

Then they all embraced and wept, and Nawn began to feel, sweeping over him in waves stronger than the sea, the long weariness and hunger and scorplings of his ordeal, and he could not move.

Just then there was another crack, so loud that it seemed thunder itself had come to live beneath the earth, and the

space in which they had rested foundered, its walls crumbling. Though stumbling in exhaustion and fear, they dashed out through the dust and noise and found themselves running down a narrow tunnel towards a dim light. Around them they felt the whole mountain sinking and shaking in its death-throes.

Suddenly, and without warning, the tunnel ceased and they leaned out into a wide void. A grey light, full of ash and dust, swirled around them. From a thousand feet below them to the edge of the horizon stretched the sea. They were on the edge of a mighty cliff.

Nawn felt himself losing touch with life. He had never seen the sea, only the quieter, darker ocean beneath the world. After so long in darkness, surrounded by stone, deprived of light and food and rest, so much space and light and strangeness was going to kill him, he thought. But then, his task had been done, the Sword had done its deed, he had delivered it. His mind and life, like his body, were suddenly empty. He swooned on the edge of the drop, and Lonia caught him.

'He is as light as a phantom,' he heard her say. But then Arime cried out: 'Look!' and Nawn, with an effort of will, opened his eyes again and looked back up the tunnel. Rolling towards them like a young sun was a massive fireball, exploding outward from some final anguish within. It came onward, swelling to fill all the tunnel. He felt Lonia grip him tightly, and heard Arime cry out —then he was falling, falling through the cold air, and he knew no more.

THE HIGH KING

*Centre of Shand, the Seat of Stonehammer
Sits splendid in the sun, strong in storm,
Watching over wild lands and wonder.*

-from The Song of Valkurn

Nawn fell through a long dream, seeming to touch only fragments of life as though they were clouds through which he fell. He watched from above, as he fell, as though he were a bird, observing all from the sky.

He struck the ocean in his dream, but was dragged out of it by mighty hands, and placed on board a ship. There, as he watched, the great mountain which burned in front of him, slowly collapsed and fell into the sea, and the ship in which he lay was forced to row desperately to avoid the turmoil of that sinking. But it managed to reach calmer waters, and it emerged into the sun from beneath burning clouds of ash, and the sails unfolded above him and around him, and he slept.

When he opened his eyes he blinked in sunlight. He lay under a warm coverlet beneath trees in what seemed to be a large garden. He wondered idly for a long time where he was—this was like nowhere in the Valley, nor did it seem like Shandhall or Wenfold. Behind the garden, white battlements reared up in the summer sun, and great flags blew over them, caught by a strong breeze. For a long time he felt that none of this concerned him, and he lay listening to the birds as they sang there merrily. Somewhere nearby water ran

from a fountain, but he could not see it.

He looked down at his hand where it lay on the coverlet. It was scorched and hard. Yet he did not feel the pain of it, nor was he thirsty or hungry, nor could he remember any ordeal that might explain the roughness of that hand. But as he wondered, slowly images came to him: fire, falling, a great roaring darkness, the eye of a Dragon, a golden sword. Gradually he pieced them together; even more gradually, he began to see that they were to do with himself. But this seemed to take him many hours, and as he did so, constructing all the events in his mind as though he were recalling a song, no single part of the whole seemed to have any power to disturb him, so that, when it was done, and he lay pondering over the whole, his heart was at peace with it.

‘So,’ he thought to himself —for as yet he had neither heard nor met any other living thing save the birds in the trees, ‘whether indeed I lie dead here in some afterworld, or whether I yet live, it matters not. The deed is done. I have done that which my father called upon me to do; I have seen his face again; the Sword is delivered. There is nothing left for me to do now.’

And yet when he thought of returning quietly to the Valley to meet his old friends and to live again in his old house, it did not seem right.

‘The Valley, maybe,’ he thought, ‘was never my true home. It seems to me that I alighted there, as a bird in a tree, but that my true home lies elsewhere. But where?’

Neither Shand, nor Wenfold, nor this quiet place beneath the sun seemed like home to him now —he did not know where he belonged. But the thought, like the white clouds

which passed over the sun during the afternoon, came and went. He turned. A beautiful woman, tall and dressed in white, with fiery hair wound in braids about her shoulders, was walking across the park towards him. She paused near him and bowed. He struggled to rise, but found himself very weak.

‘Do not try to rise, my lord,’ said the lady, ‘for you are but lately woken, and I have watched you from a high place as you opened your eyes and looked on the day. Welcome to the High Houses of the Province of Tara.’

‘My lady Lonia?’ he said. ‘Is it you? But you...you...’

‘I am fair to look upon?’ she laughed, and the laugh was like the fountain’s water behind the trees. ‘But I was not before? Aye, you are right —when first you saw me I wore the black robes of the enemy still, and the fire and darkness was upon me. But that was long ago. It is the depth of the summer now, and you have been in Tara for almost a month.’

Nawn could not speak for astonishment.

‘Aye,’ the princess went on, coming forward and touching his arm gently, ‘long have I waited by your bedside, watching as Arime our beloved struggled to heal you. You took food in your trance, fortunately, but wandered long in your fever —yet you recovered yourself, at the last. But Arime said that you walked many times close to the Gate of Death, as though seeking to go beyond it. When the worst was over, though, we nursed you back to full life here in the gardens of the High Houses, above Alathosa, the grand port of Tara, which looks east over the sea whence we came. Arime said you would wake fully either today or tomorrow. You have slept since we plummeted into the ocean far away.’

‘Please, my lady,’ said Nawn, pondering her words, ‘what happened then? I have only vague pictures in my mind — falling, and a ship, and the island sinking. How were we saved?’

‘By Galatar of Turgal were we plucked from that churning sea,’ she replied, ‘and in the nick of time. For he, coming with a great fleet from Tara as had been planned, alone of all the ships had ventured close to the thunder and the fire —for when he arrived at Wormstone all was transformed: the Reaver fleets were in disarray, and the world began to shake.

‘He fetched us from the water by his own hand, and then he and his men laboured long and hard to escape the pull of the waters as Wormstone sank beneath the waves. The Citadel of the Four Winds is drowned, my lord Nawn — Dare-kor and the Morndred are no more. But of this great wonder only you can speak fully. You have wandered much in speech in your dreaming, but no one knows the whole tale more than you, and we have waited anxiously for you to awake that you might tell us of your deeds.’

Nawn fell silent and looked out over the garden. There, between the green and brown girths of the trees, he thought he caught the glimmer of the blue sea, and he remembered the terrible cliff at Wormstone, and the void, and the wild sky.

‘My Lady Lonia,’ he said after a while, ‘I know that you are a princess of Restonia, and the betrothed of Arime, who is to be King. Fitting it is, then, that you are called Princess and Lady. But wherefore do you call me “my lord”? For I am but a wood-warden from a far-off valley, and have no such claim to lordship of any kind.’

Lonia smiled, and her smile was like the coming out of the sun from behind a cloud.

'Not so, Nawn,' she said gently, 'for in your sleep, though much remains hidden, much also that was strange becomes clear from the scattered words you spoke; and are you not the son of Maranain of Rondar, he whom we called Tarazion, the Herald of Raendu? But, moreso than that, have you not done a deed greater than any have done in the world for an age? It was by your hand, was it not, that the Dragon was freed? Was it not through your deeds that Wormstone fell and Dare-kor perished? We do not know what happened in the dark beneath the Citadel, but that much has been surmised. Is it not so?'

Nawn nodded. He recalled his father's face, and the eye of the Dragon. He felt the shock in his arm as he had cleaved the chain that bound the beast. He was silent for a long time.

'Then what happens now?' he said at last.

'Now things can begin!' said Lonía. 'Arime commanded that he would not be crowned, nor would we be wed, until it was known whether you would live or die. And, knowing that you would live, he has waited still until you should fully recover. We are to journey to Shandhall as soon as you are able, and then all the lords and kings will gather and Arime and I will be crowned and wed before summer's end. But first he is to be accepted here, by the lords of Tara, as the heir to their throne too, and as king of this eastern province. This is to happen as soon as he knows that you have arisen.'

Nawn swallowed back tears that had suddenly swelled up in him. To have so much wait upon him seemed much more than he deserved—but he remembered the horror of the

darkness and the great struggle deep beneath the earth and he said nothing.

‘Most gracious Lonia,’ he said after a while, ‘may I see the King?’

And Lonia laughed, and said:

‘Indeed, my lord —he waits to greet you.’

She helped him to stand —and, leaning with one hand on a stick that was brought to him, and on Lonia’s arm with the other, he came to the High Houses, and went within, and there in a chamber filled with the light of the late afternoon as the sun sank he met Arime again and they embraced and wept tears of joy together.

Arime was crowned King of Tara the next day, and he sat on the Throne where he had once waited for Baladac, and wore the silver crown of Tara, and received the lords of the realm and took their oaths. But the first action he did as King was to make Nawn a lord of that realm, and there was great cheering when this was done — for Nawn had told the whole tale of his deed under Wormstone, as far as he could remember it: the greatest act of the Sword Sundergost, in the service of Dragons.

Then, while the summer began to wane, Arime made preparations to return to Shand, and before long they rode over the mountains in a long procession of splendour, pausing by the banks of the Lake Lendrim as Ryna had done on her final ride. In time they came through the wild lands to Restonia, and there they were greeted by thousands of the people of the realm, and by King Helca. From there they went on to Shandhall, and it was the last week of the

summer when they slowly wound their way up the steep hill to that place as the westering sun caught its towers in a flash of gold.

There Arime was crowned High King of Shand, of the line of Valkurn, long thought lost: and he wore the Golden Crown that Baladac had thought to usurp, and Nawn brought him the Golden Sword at the feet of his throne, and Arime made Nawn a Companion of the Sword Sundergost, and bestowed other honours on him before the crowds who gathered there in that mighty hall. There Galatar, Emperor of Turgal, swore everlasting friendship and alliance with the High Crown of Shand, and many old wounds between ancient peoples were healed. And then Arime wed Lonia, and she was made High Queen over all of Shand —and the shout of joy that went up from the multitude when they stood together rang in those hills timelessly.

Then Arime rode north to Miria with Nawn and Lonia and many others, and he stood at the feet of the Penning, and had heralds declare in great voices that Wormstone had fallen, and that Gogaver and his people were therefore freed from any oaths they had made to the servants of the Morndred, and they were given the wild lands about the feet of those mountains as their own, charged with their keeping in the name of the High King.

But Nawn knew, as they made camp one autumn evening below the frowning faces of those mighty mountains, that he had come back to the road that led up into the high passes and down into his home, and that Arime here had to leave him to return to his kingly duties in the lands below. And yet, though he knew the Valley better than anywhere he had

been on his journeys, it did not now seem to him to be home. He walked away from the camp, and stood looking out across the woods, westward.

Arime came to him there.

‘What is it, Nawn?’ he said. ‘I thought you would be glad to return to your people in the Valley. You are free to return to Shand, or Tara, or any land under my crown at any time you wish.’

Nawn smiled at him and turned to watch the sun sink.

‘It is not that,’ he said after a while. ‘I know that you have honoured me greatly, and indeed I have riches enough to be renowned as the wealthiest man in the Valley, were that my desire; nor am I saddened by the great freedoms you have granted to me. No, it is something much less easy to explain. I had thought that the Valley was my home, but now that I come to ride back into it, I find that it is not. Nor is my home here, nor in the South, nor in Tara. Where can I rest, Arime? Why can I not return?’

Arime sighed.

‘My friend,’ he said, ‘you have told us of your deeds, and of what you saw beneath the Firevault in Wormstone that is now gone. You have walked on the margins of this world, and conversed with the Herald of Raendu. Indeed, though I do not think it is the same as with kings, his blood runs in your veins, and you are his heir. So is it that I feel close to him, whom I lost; thus was it that I saw your face in the waters of Kaela, and not his. But how can any mortal soul walk outside the world and still dwell at peace in it? I think that in time you must journey again to Wenfold, and seek out the Warden. Tell him that I sent you to look in the Book of

Seven. Tell him that you need to read there of the tales of the making of the world. Tell him that you seek the Gate.'

'I do not understand,' Nawn said.

'Nor do I, not fully,' Arime replied. 'But the old tales say that around this world lies a wall, made by Raendu's Father before the Dream. And in that wall lies a Gate. Perhaps through that gate you will find the home you seek.'

Nawn said no more, and they went back to the camp and slept. In the morning they came to the road that wound up into the pass that led to the Valley, and Nawn took his leave of that company. He was not saddened, because he knew that he would see Arime and Lonia and Galatar again, but as he rode up that path his heart grew quiet, and he came through those mountains and down the steep paths on their inner side in a deep thoughtfulness, and as night fell he lit no lantern and went by hidden paths towards his home.

As he rode towards his own gate, the world had shrunk around him, and so had his thought. He fell to thinking of the winter, and his stores, and the people of the villages, and what would have been said or done in his absence. But then he paused, for through the trees he could see that a light burned in his cottage. He hurried up the path, and crept to the window. There, through the glass, he saw Alween stirring the fire. He opened the door and went in.

She came to him, startled.

'Nawn!' she cried. 'Why, Nawn! Then it was true! You have not died! I have kept your house for you. I told them you would return!'

Then Nawn smiled, and embraced her.

Alween brought him food, and replenished his winter stores, and prepared his home, and as he watched her move about the cottage Nawn remembered that he had once loved her —and, once he had become settled again in the forest, he wondered that he could have forgotten that.

The winter drew nearer, and Nawn was still shy of other folk, though many came to see him: the wise of the villagers knew then that he was indeed Maranain's son by blood and by deed. He did not tell them all that he had seen and done in the Outside, for none of them had journeyed there, and the realms and the wide woods and the broad seas that lay beyond their mountain walls would seem like a dream to them, he thought —but he told them enough, though he did not desire their praise. He found also, though, that once they had seen him, and marvelled at the gear of far-off Shand that he had brought back with him, and heard one or two tales, their talk turned to the matters of the Valley, the coming winter, the plans for the spring, the doings of local folk. Nawn smiled to himself, and was glad —he wanted to forget the Outside for a while if he could, and to return to the quietness and peace of the Valley. He wanted to spend time with Alween; he wanted a home.

But the restlessness would not completely leave him. Alween saw in him that he was not the same since his return. She would visit him to find him standing outside, in the woods, staring at the mountain-tops, or slowly pacing around his cottage. She learned, after a while, that he would not listen to her talk, but seemed in a half-dream. Then, one day, as the first real frosts began to bite in the wood, he sat by his fire and when she knocked on the door he did not get up,

and she went inside to him and he began speaking to her as though he had waited for her.

‘Alween, my friend and beloved,’ he said, taking her hand, ‘I want you to come with me through the forest. I want to show you the window through which I first looked on the Outside.’

She followed him as they both went, cloaked, along a narrow path through the trees. She was a little afraid, but after a while they emerged before a still pool of water, surrounded by stiff, grey branches, overshadowed by a finger of golden rock. It was a grey and cloudy day, but the water seemed to shine. Slowly, she realised that she was looking at Vorandor’s Water, where the founder of the Valley had stood in the beginning of the history of her people’s home. She fell silent as Nawn stood at the water’s edge. For a long while he stood there, and nothing happened, except that she heard birds far off in the forest. Then he turned to her and his face seemed lighter, though his eyes were full of tears. He came to her, and took her hand.

‘Alween,’ he said gently, in the strange tongue of the poets that she had heard him sometimes use, ‘I cannot promise thee much, for I am left with nothing but that which thou hast seen. I have no place now in this world, but as a ship makes its harbour where it may, perhaps thou and I could make a home—for a little while. Will thou consent to be my wife?’

Alween smiled and held him. She felt as though she were his anchor, then, and that through her he had finally arrived home.

Never had there been such a wedding in the Valley, for the

High King of Shand came there to perform the ceremony himself, and Galatar of Turgal came with him; and to the people of Vorandor, who had never seen such folk from the Outside, it was as though gods had descended to walk in their midst —great horses, and rich cloaks, and colours, and laughing faces, and beautiful women, and a one-eyed giant dressed in gold —and splendour upon splendour came down from the mountains that spring, and Nawn was wedded in the heart of the Valley to Alween, the daughter of Tolly, and the Valley rejoiced for months afterward. And Arime proclaimed the Valley to be a separate realm, not owing allegiance to any High King if it so chose, but Brandor, the Master of the Valley, knelt before Arime and swore loyalty to the High Throne of Lond in Shand.

Then Arime said to the people who had gathered there — and who of the Valley had not come out to see such magnificence?— that to the north and west of the Penning lay the ancient land of Vildon, whence Vorandor had come over a thousand years before. The Dark Winter that had frozen its forests had long since withdrawn, he said, and the world was free from the shadow of the Morndred which had held all in fear —why should they not return there and settle new fields, if they so wished? Many then took up his words and before that summer was done a great many of the younger folk of the Valley had formed a great expedition and rode out to explore the lands to the north, beyond the mountain wall. Never had so many of Vorandor's people ridden forth since they had closed themselves in, long ago, and they returned with tales of wonder —wide woods, running rivers, rich pastures, and far horizons— and many

of their families moved there and formed a new land, taking the ancient name of Vildon, and swearing allegiance to the High King in Shand.

Thus did Arime's realm swell to stretch from Vildon in the North to the foothills of the Guardians in the South, and from the Great Western Wild to the shores of the eastern sea where Tara gleamed. And mighty Turgal was his friend, and a great concourse of peoples travelled back and forth from that southern land to Shand through Tara, and it was said that the merchants of Tara were as rich as kings in their own right — but none withheld their riches, and there was no want or poverty in those lands. Even the Middle Lands, whose squabbling had left them weak and open to the enemy for a long age, found that, without the shadow of Wormstone darkening the horizon, their counsels grew wiser, and their disputes fewer. Rondar flourished under Colomain its king, and though he grew very old, he devised many songs to tell of the deeds of that age, and was accounted the greatest of minstrels till his death.

Before the summer in which she was wed had finished, Alween journeyed with Nawn south to Shand, looking on the wide lands of the Outside for the first time; and she came to Shandhall, where they were greeted with honour, and Nawn saw what Arime had done with the Golden Sword.

There, on the highest point of the hills, where Arime, as Bron, had looked down on Shandhall and the kingdom that he would come to rule, sat the Seat of Stonehammer, the rough stone chair on which, so the tales said, the first kings of Shand had been crowned. Here, shining like living gold, the Sword Sundergost had been set upright in the stone with

binding words: that none but a true King of Shand should ever draw that blade from that sheath, and that there it would remain forevermore, until Shand was drowned and done. When the sun rose above the peaks of the Mountains of Morning far away and glimmered on the hilts of Sundergost as though kindling a fallen star, let the people of Shand remember, Arime had said, that they lived in Raendu's Dream and had been saved by his mercy. When Nawn descended from those hills, Alween saw, his eyes were shining.

Alween returned to the Valley with Nawn before that winter came, and they lived there many years together —and there was a great coming and going of people from that place, until their humble home had welcomed kings and queens into it, and their children had sat upon the knees of the great. Alween bore Nawn many children, and Nawn's eldest son settled in Vildon and was taken as the chief of that people.

In the distant east the Reavers were set free to farm their own islands, and the Shadowed Men were sent to Fretravorn in the west, beyond the Wild and the Great Wall, or further east and north, to the cold islands near the coasts of Lanlor — but they were now a subdued folk, without the dark fire in their eyes that had haunted their race and taken the power of speech from them, and they faded from the histories of the world.

Of the island of Wormstone or the great worm which had given it its name, no trace was ever found, though the ships of the many traders who began to ply those waters avoided

the place where it had been, and fogs and clouds ever seemed to hang over the sea there.

Arime went with Nawn to the Wood of Seven one autumn before he had long been on the throne, and sought out his mother's grave. He never found the Glade of the Seven Statues, which many said was enchanted and hidden from mortal eyes by the gods, but he did find a place where three graves stood: and he knew that there lay Ryna, and Ryna's mother Alagar, and father Lisaeon. He commanded a stone to be set there, on which was written some of their history, and he buried there with them the Ring of Ravena and the locket which he and Lonja had found in the crypt of the Carthog Wunderalga long before.

In another place, Arime set a grave for that same Wunderalga, and bid his spirit, which alone of his race had shown the capacity for love, find rest. But before he left that place, Arime saw a strange sight that haunted him like a song for long afterwards.

He was riding with Nawn from his mother's grave to rejoin the party with which he had come from Helca's Castle in Restonia, when suddenly, through the trees, they saw a clearing lit with bright light. The sun, as he looked up, was hidden—but the light in that space between the trees was like sunlight. They rode nearer, but their horses came to a halt before they entered that place, and they would not go on.

'What enchantment is this, that the forest is filled with a light so holy?' said Arime to Nawn as they sat there watching.

Nawn did not reply—for suddenly, as he peered through

the trees, his breath stopped, and his blood chilled. He gripped Arime's arm and pointed.

There, fleetingly, as though the green of the trees had taken on a shape and in the same moment lost it, Arime saw, or thought he saw, a rider, dressed all in green, riding a green horse, standing there, watching them. But, as they sat frozen in silence, the horse turned, and the vision was gone.

They roused themselves as the sun came out from behind a cloud and washed the wood with daylight. Birds sang, and the glades of the forest were golden and red with the season.

They looked at each other but said nothing, and rode back to their companions in silence. Nawn was thinking of the tale of Arime's mother Ryna, who had long ago, Arime had told him, come to the heart of that haunted wood with the aid of a Green Lady.

Nawn and Arime met many times more, for it became their habit to visit each other's homes every summer, and sometimes Galatar would come there with his Empress, Cundria of Valadria. Then Nawn learned of what had become of each member of the Crimson Company that had set out from Restonia long before: Barragath went to dwell in Rondar with Colomain, the King, his friend; Wirrithal settled in the Middle Lands, near the river Tarrabelner; Ulforth became even mightier in the eyes of his peers in the South Vales, so that they even considered breaking their long tradition and taking him as King beneath Arime—but he refused the throne. Risaeon became a close counsellor of the new Queen of Restonia, Jeneca, Lonia's sister. But the Crimson Company was kept alive, and the youth of Restonia

and from all of Shand vied to wear its colours by seeking adventure, often journeying in unknown lands to the south or in wild Fretravorn beyond the Great Wood in the west.

Alween knew that Nawn had grown deeply content with the years, and that the children she had borne him had settled his mind greatly. She knew that he still often visited the Pool, hoping to see his father's face there; she knew also that he had not forgotten Arime's words about Wenfold, as he had told them to her—but after a while he visited the Pool less, and seemed to think of other things than the Outside, and she was happy with that.

In her heart of hearts, though, she knew that that happiness was not eternal. When her husband grew old enough to become anxious about climbing the Shining Stair again and leaving the Valley, she knew that the time was approaching when he would make his last journey. It came sooner than she had hoped.

One winter, while the snow crept up the window of the cottage, she returned from the village to find that he had already packed.

'Have you been to the Pool?' she asked him quietly.

He shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'I have grown too old to see anything in the water. Sometimes I do not need an enchanted water anymore to know what I must do.'

Alween said nothing, feeling the wave of loss grow in her. He came to her and held her.

'Alween, my love, my love,' he said, 'thou knowest this is all a dream. We mortals long to wake all our lives, and yet we weep and groan under the pain of it when the time draws

nigh. Remember Raendu's mercy.'

'I don't want to forget thee,' said Alween, sobbing. 'But that's the way of the world, isn't it? Things go away, and when they're gone from our sight they drift away even in our minds.'

'Memory is not needed when thou art awake,' he said. She gripped his hand, then let it fall.

'But when will that be?' she asked.

Nawn shook his head.

'Time is the dream,' he said. 'Raendu waits for thy waking. I will not say goodbye, for that defies the truth. I could never leave thee in truth, nor could I leave our children, nor any that I truly love. The leagues of land and the ages of time that are the mortal world are the lie, Alween. The true landscape is elsewhere.'

Alween nodded, and together they went out into the gently falling snow.

'The pass will be blocked,' she said.

'No,' he said, 'I think not. I will come through it. I go to Wenfold, Alween, there to read of the Gate in the Book of Seven. I will wait for thee beyond it.'

They embraced and he walked off.

Alween watched his grey shape until it became a faint white shadow against the swirling whiteness, and then it was gone completely.

In the morning she looked out from her window across sheltered lands where patches of green could be seen beneath the snow. The Valley lay spread beyond the naked trees, a winter tapestry of greys, blacks and shining whites.

She wept quietly to herself.

The bright rays of the sun cascaded at that moment down into the Valley and lit all its fields with gold, like fire. She thought of the great sword she had seen, imbedded in the mountain, sparkling in the same sunlight: Sundergost, the Sword of Hope. Her tears felt like drops of hot silver. She lit the fire and boiled the water for the day's work, turning from the window to the grey light of the cottage.

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The Forging of Paranûl

Garmon was a great spirit, who had had much joy in Raendu's Dream —and when he saw that great harm had been done there, he went into it to ease its sorrow and aid in its healing. Aradu, armed with the Wand, assailed the world, freezing it with bitter cold, but Garmon drove back the Ice, and made to keep him at bay a great Wall of Ice all about lands and seas of the Dream.

But Aradu, hating Garmon, stirred the great beasts who slept in the dark Underworld and one rose up, Kaleakar, Father of Dragons, and Garmon struggled with him. In the end, he defeated the beast, and Kaleakar saw that he had been deceived —and from the tooth of the beast Garmon made Paranûl, the world's first weapon, and he made Gulinol, his great Horn, from the shell of Kaleakar's ear, and he sounded that great Horn and Aradu shook in fear, and with the Sword he drove Aradu out beyond the Wall of Ice again.

Garmon built the White Tower in the far north on the edge of the World of the Dream and dwelt there in watchfulness, and the Sword Paranûl and the Horn Gulinol were put into the sea.

While Aradu slept in the outer darkness the World of the Dream blossomed and Terime and Arima awoke —but Aradu was drawn by the sound of their laughter, and he envied it and he disguised himself and crept into the World

again and tempted Terime, but she refused him. Then he did a great evil, and harmed Terime, and never had such pain been known there till then. Arima came upon him, and such was Arima's wrath in the battle that followed that Aradu was forced to hold hard onto the hard things of the Dream so that he became part of them and he fled to the Northern Wastes. Arima and Terime, weakened, left the world —for Raendu remembered the Gate which gave living things the power to leave the Dream in which they had awakened. But their children remained.

The Tragedy of the Redellan.

Aradu had always desired Kaela of the Flowers, and in the Wood Before the World had sought to approach her, but she had spurned him. After he fled into the Northern Wastes, exhausted and gravely wounded, he sought other comfort, and in time he took to himself three wives: the first was called Zarae, and from her sprang the creatures called Earth Titans, who were bereft of joy, and who for the most part left the world with their mother when she grew weary of Aradu's darkness. The second was Waranu, but she did not bear a child but fled from Aradu into the east of the world of the Dream and hid herself.

Third was Arasha, who had followed Nilnie's shadow in the Wood. She did not care for light, and dwelt always far from Raendar the Sun; her raiment was grey, and her manner cold. From her were spawned the creatures of the Great Ice, who love the darkness and sleep at the sun's rising, and Arasha was for a long time content to dwell in the palace of

ice which Aradu had built for her far from daylight. He gave her the Wand of Winter as a bridepiece. But when Arasha bore only creatures of darkness for Aradu, and not the creatures of light that he so desired, he grew weary of her and threw her into a frozen dungeon. In her heart then she repented of evil and resolved to bear a child of beauty to Aradu, and she put forth her power and her cell was melted, and she enchanted Aradu and he did not resist her.

Uneos and Arata were the children of Arasha and Aradu. Uneos was beautiful, and spurned the pain and darkness of his father, and dwelt in the light. He came out of the Northern Wastes to the land of Malamirne, the Meadow of Flowers, Kaela's land, the eastern edge of which was the home of the Morning Sun.

There walked the Lady of the Flowers with her entourage, and all about her was light and song, and light from the House of the Sun clung to the hills, and swam in the waters of Malamirne even when the stars shone above.

Arazon the Golden Hand and Suruastor, the Proud One, came to dwell there, hearing of the wonders that lay beneath its hills, and one day they were led by a shadow into a mighty cavern under the earth, and saw deep and secret things there, and Suruastor was overturned, and returned not to the surface, desiring only to somehow bring the deep mysteries he had seen there to the light.

Arazon was troubled, for he had glimpsed those parts of Raendu's Dream not intended for mortal eyes, but he was also entranced by what he had seen beneath the earth, and he brought forth gems uncountable, and made many beautiful

and wonderful things. But Suruastor, his heart darkened with evil, grew jealous of Arazon and stole his greatest Jewel.

But first came Uneos, like a ray of light, finding Kaela alone, and he saw her in her Mirror when she walked in the woods, and she saw him, the first of all living things to look upon her face. He was loved by Kaela, who made the Redellan, the Great Flower, to celebrate their love, by which the union and healing of the Dream was to be achieved.

But while Uneos grew great among the great, Arata his brother felt his father's voice grow louder in his mind, and in the end he betrayed Malamirne and poisoned the Redellan, with the aid of Valasne, handmaiden of Kaela, who, jealous of her beauty, also desired the love of Arata. At this, his mother Arasha cast aside her grey raiment and left Aradu's palace in grief and anger, breaking the Wand before his face, and he never saw her again.

Uneos fought Arata Ashael, Lord of Demons, also called Gon-runin the Usurper, and was thrice wounded. And Kaela sought long over the earth for Uneos, and the Throne of Flowers in Malamirne sat empty, and the people were troubled, for great beasts had risen out of cracks in the earth and were ravaging the land. Uneos died in Kaela's arms from his wounds.

The Fall of Malamirne: The Westbane

When Kaela sought Uneos across the world, and the Throne of Flowers sat empty, Surastor Igrignor, Dragonlord, declared himself Lord of Malamirne, and proclaimed Arata Ashael Gon-runin, King of the World, and he sat upon the

Throne, and it wilted beneath him. And the great beasts which had arisen from the Rifts in the land now roamed across the hills and waters doing great evil. Then Kaela, coming through their enchantments and finding Arata wearing his father's face and speaking in his father's voice, sought out and confronted Aradu with her Mirror, and the Lands were split. Malamirne sank into the dragon's realm below, and the seas swallowed all.

Mighty ships were made from the great flowers that Kaela had devised, and many thousands were saved, but many of those who had worshipped Gon-runin and the Dragons perished. This was called the Westbane, the time of disaster, when the ancient world passed away.

Garmon came then from the White Tower and took Aradu out of the world and back to the Wood, whence he could never come again, for he had become crippled in mind and body through his own evil, as revealed to him by Kaela in her Mirror.

When Kaela's country had passed away beneath the waves, Kaela herself threw a hood over her face and passed swiftly over the turbulent waters to the Gate at the edge of the world, and Raendu, who waited there, suffered her not to halt but let her go. She passed then out of this world and none saw her in that form again. When the great fleets of the ships of men came to shore, Raendu took leave of his charges and went after Kaela and found her wandering in darkness in the Wood Before the World, and he called to her but she was long in answering. He lifted her gaze to meet his, and asked "Whither do you walk, sister?"

And she replied, "I go to the house of Nilnie, for she who understands shadows can maybe see into my heart."

"I shall go with you," said Raendu, and they went to that house, which stands ever in the twilight between worlds, but Raendu stood outside the door, for his light drove the woven darkness from Nilnie's wheel and if he were to look upon her tapestries they would be unmade.

But after a little while Kaela came from that place seeking him, and saying, "I have seen the Water of the World's Edge, wherein drifts the Pattern of Things made and unmade. And I see that I have walked in a dream."

"Indeed it is so," said Raendu.

They turned from Nilnie's door and looked out upon the world through the Gate in the Wall, and Raendu spoke again, saying, "Behold, Kaela Malaneir, sister! You are no longer bound in a common dream, but are awakened. Rejoice!"

And Kaela dropped her mortal raiment and became like unto a bird, and Raendu flew beside her, and they soared so high that the sky of the Wood Before the World itself was not wide or high enough, and her wings brushed the edge of things, and she felt there the cold, soft rain of Raendu's Father, falling beyond knowledge, fulfilling all hope.

AFTER MALAMIRNE

The Foundation of the Enchanted Kingdoms

This is a summary of the post-Malamirne period of Gandrian history. Inevitably, it concerns itself a great deal with wars since the Fall of Malamirne, and yet it is not directly a work of martial history. The world of Gandria after the Fall of Malamirne, as far as this history is concerned, includes the Turgalin Empire to the South and its eastern offshoots; the frozen lands of Lanlor in the North; the Dark Isles; and the cluster of states in the West, in Tara and the lands beyond the Mountains of Morning: Shand, the Middle Kingdoms and Rondar in the west, Vildon and Silverian in the north. The main focus is on the fabled Four Kingdoms of Shand.

Prior to the Fall of Malamirne, the lands in the west of the world were dark, sparse, and wild. The lights that played about the hills of the land of flowers were absent from these windswept and empty plains; the forests were deep and quiet; the beasts of the fields and woods were left to their own devices.

But they were not wholly forsaken, for Kaela herself in her wanderings would come here, especially to the forests, and here she blessed many lonely waters, including Starwater in Miria, the rivers, streams and pools of Kirratamon, and the waters of the Penning. Kaela's sister-spirit the Green Lady would also ride at length on the plains and in the deep woods, and Nilnie's folk haunted the shadows; there were places where it was said Raendu himself came and danced

with his folk at the very dawning of the world—but only at Wenfold in the Guardian Mountains, the last far-flung outpost of the cities of the Meadow of Flowers, was some clear memory of Malamirne's light preserved. Even here, though, the people dwindled and the vast city under the mountains grew emptier.

Over much of the western world the shock of Malamirne's fall hung like an enormous shadow, made more menacing by the fact that, along with the survivors from Malamirne had come Shadowed Men and evil creatures from the Cataclysm who had established early footholds on the coasts north of Tara and even around the harbours of Alathosa.

By the end of the first century after the Fall, these raiders had established themselves in the islands which had newly formed where Malamirne had once been, and they were striking at the coasts of Hethrian, Tara, and Northern Turgal, where they rapidly gained footholds. Within ten years, their hosts were marching through the great Pass of the South towards the Middle Lands, while their fleets harried Alathosa.

The Founding of the New Realms was taken from the beginning of the Enchanted Kingdoms of the North.

The West was at first a hodge-podge of wandering or semi-established peoples, dishevelled from the Fall and unaligned with each other, forming rapidly into small city-states or petty kingdoms in the region known as the Middle Lands. Some of the strongest of these, the realms of Rondar and Restonia, were arising in the west, but none was as yet free of grief, such had been the devastation of their homeland.

The Isle of Varandolia was settled in the Far Western Sea, the Great Ocean, Tordalra. The peoples of the world, fleeing the disaster of Malamirne, and the encroachments of the coastal raiders, settled in Vildon in the North and established the realms of Hushgold, Sushsilver, Lifdell and Nimonmoor, as well as the great realm of Kirratamon in the Wood of Seven, where seven ancient statues still stood in a glade.

The lack of a central authority over all the lands of the west might have led to war, but such was the threat posed by the Shadowed Men, along with the shock of the Fall, that peace prevailed, especially in Vildon and Shand.

About 150 years after the Founding of the New Realms, the Hargoths of Pathia and Garthia in the Middle Lands, under the influence of Valasne the Enchantress, the former Handmaiden of Kaela, and Arata Gon-runin, son of Aradu and Arasha, seemed to threaten to undermine the peace. Escaping from the ruin of Malamirne, the evil duo had wandered afar in the lands of men, wearing many disguises and establishing places of darkness, calling themselves the Serpent King and Queen. Despite the great resources they possessed (they mustered together the Shadowed Men in the west to form the basis of an army) they steadily over-extended themselves in the course of repeated conflicts. Their armies became too unwieldy for their base in Pathia.

In 150 AF (After Fall), at the Battle of the League of Kings, followers of Gon-runin, the evil Ninth Race or Shadowed Men, and other fell creatures, coming out of the Cataclysm and threatening to overrun the kingdoms of men, were defeated and imprisoned in Fretravorn. Arata and Valasne,

once more escaped justice, but the foundation of the Firstpeace had been laid.

150-300 Powers such as Pathia or Ultundria were falling into the second rank among the Middle Kingdoms and there steadily emerged five major states (Rondar, Vildon, Garthia, Turgal and Shand) which came to dominate the diplomacy and warfare of third century post-Fall Gandria.

This was an age in which Rondar, first under Astar IV and then later under Arropolon, came closer to controlling the Western Realms than at any time before or since—but its endeavours were always held in check, in the last resort at least by an alliance of the other Great Powers of the West (Vildon, Garthia and Shand). Since the cost of maintaining vast hosts and fleets had become horrendously great by the third century, countries which could create a sense of inner unity and freedom of communication such as Vildon and Shand enjoyed many advantages over their potential rivals; also the geographical positions of both these kingdoms (or alliances of kingdoms, as they most properly could be described) meant that they retained the capacity to intervene in the struggles of the Middle Lands while being geographically removed from them.

300-400 By the end of the third century both Shand and the Enchanted Kingdoms were transformed into fully united and integrated realms, advanced in road and river networks and uplifted by a series of great leaders, so that they could prevent the rise of any evil powers in the Middle Lands. This was the Firstpeace of Gandria, which enabled Shand to explore and establish provinces from Fretravorn in the west to Tara and the islands of the east; this was the time when the

Great Waste was fortified and Nesandor built the Hall of Raendu in Vildon.

The Farndonathian

Vondandor ruled Vildon as High King. Kumanor was King of Sushsilver, and Anar-unin became King of Fretravorn under the auspices of the King of Miria, who in turn was under the High King in Shand. During this time Wellandor King of Vildon sent Hurn the Huntsman to Villinan to bring back Farndonath, deadly to all evil things, as is told in the Farndonathian —the defence against dragons. This flower grew in many secret places of the world and protected them from evil. The fourth century, for the most part, was therefore a peaceful one.

The Rengalian

400-405 As the fourth century drew to a close, despite their best efforts, ancient lands such as Rondar and Garthia were falling into decay, and evil had crept back into the West. Nesandor King, who built the Hall of Raendu in Vildon, journeyed to Fretravorn but was betrayed by Shadowed Men at Randack, where Gon-runin was worshipped still, and was mortally wounded and left Gandria over the Sea, leaving the Sceptre of Gandria to his four sons; Vildon was divided into the Four Enchanted Kingdoms, (Nimonmoor in the north, Sushsilver in the south, Lifdell in the west and Hushgold in the east) but remained at peace. Nesandor's tale is told in the Rengalian, Song of the Silver Harp.

The Dark Winter

405 Many journeyed south to establish new lands — Silverian was founded; the building of Ormrond, Kingstower, begun. The Four Kingdoms chose Rolkurn the Strong as the seventh High King of Shand, the Free Land, and the first Shandcrown was made —but, as the fifth century began, a terrible winter struck the North and spread throughout the West, freezing the land down to the Guardian Mountains. It later became clear that Valasne, who had remained hidden, searching the desolate North, had found the Palace of Ice where Arasha had lived, and acquired there the broken Wand of Winter, that was made from a splinter from the Staff of Life, and with it she had frozen all the North, decimating Vildon so that, of its kingdoms of Lifdell, Nimonmoor, Hushgold and Sushsilver were left only Winterwood and Fawnsnow. The people of Vildon were scattered and became known as Wanderers or Strangers. Valasne overran Shand with the aid of Arata and the Turgal hordes from the east. The Hall of Raendu in Elvale was thrown down, leaving only three pillars standing.

406-411 Valasne declared herself Queen of the World. Wolves and plague spread through the lands. Within five years Vorandor, pursued by Solveer, Arata's lieutenant, found refuge in the Penning and founded the Valley of Sheft, where Farndonath bloomed. But Vildon had gone, and the Four Kingdoms of Shand were unquestionably now, despite their losses in the Wars, the strongest alliance in Gandria, though they were besieged.

The Tale of Kelva

Kelva was the daughter of Vorandor and Estea and she was innocent of heart and loved to dance upon the wild green. She loved all things and the world was her garden, but she loved most of all the creatures of the stream, of the river and pool, both those that drank there and those that dwelt within the water. Her laughter was like a waterfall, and she could speak to many wild creatures and knew the ways of the wild like no other.

One day, dancing along a shallow bed of streams in the Enchanted Kingdoms, she was found by Oroban, the god of the river, who fell in love with her. When Kelva freed an otter from a bramble on the riverbank, Oroban spoke to her and wooed her and she dwelt with him a while in the secret places of the river, far from the lands of ordinary folk.

When his daughter did not return from the wild, Vorandor went out himself to seek for her, and coming through Oroban's enchantments he found her and was at first dismayed. But Oroban asked for the hand of Kelva, and the king saw that they shared a genuine love — yet he deemed it unfit that a daughter of his should wed a spirit of the wild water, and said that in turn for her hand the river-god must abandon the treasure dearest to his heart.

Oroban then fetched the Ring of Rivers, which he had made with long labour, working with water and stone, and it was a silver ring, smooth but with the appearance of being rough-hewn: and that ring held part of the spirit of the rivers of the Enchanted Kingdoms and would give to the wearer

the gift of speech to the things of the wild, beasts, birds and fishes.

Vorandor was moved by Oroban's gift, for he loved the ring more than anything except Kelva, and he himself wed his daughter Kelva to the river-god by the stream, and gave the ring to his daughter, signifying the marriage. And from then on Kelva dwelt for part of the year with Estea and Vorandor in Vildon, and for part in the wild world of Oroban.

When the Enchantress was freed and the Firstpeace was broken, and the Great Winter descended, the people of Elvale became a wandering folk without direction. It was young Vorandor of Elvale and Estea, exiled queen of Sushsilver, who attempted to throw down Solveer, who the Morndred had set up to rule the Enchanted Kingdoms of the north. But Lifdell and Hushgold were put to fire, and they failed to topple Solveer —and Estea dreamt of the Lady of Night, who warned her that the days of the Enchanted Kingdoms were numbered, and that hope now lay hidden.

So Vorandor's quest to re-unite the Four Kingdoms of Vildon failed, and he fled from there with his people, but they were harried by Solveer, and their treasures were taken, even the Ring of Rivers, cut from the hand of Kelva, daughter of the King, before she died.

On his daughter's cruel slaying, Vorandor put on his silver armour in silence and rode out against the wishes of Estea and he broke through the lines of the enemy and challenged Solveer. Solveer was craven, seeing the silver king in the mists and starlight on the hilltop, and he sent out the wicked

and mis-shapen beast-men to waylay him—but Vorandor in his rage slew all but one of the creatures, and sent that one back with a message, demanding the Ring. To this Solver agreed, and was never more feared by the forces he led.

So Vorandor mourned Kelva his daughter, and buried the Ring of Rivers in her grave, and so passed from the world two of the greatest treasures of the Enchanted Realms of old.

The Lost Valley

Then Vorandor, King of Elvale, with a remnant of his people—and such was their grief and their wrath that none of their enemies dared to approach them—disappeared from the field of battle into the high and forbidding passes of the Penning mountains whom no one had explored.

Vorandor led his people on through the snow with a will of iron, but he was separated from them in a blizzard, seeking a way ahead, and he fell into an abyss and was believed lost by his people. Neberon the Herald, uncle and dear friend of the king, wept for the first time in his long life, and many mourned and despaired.

But Vorandor had not perished—he had been borne by a mighty wind and landed unharmed in a deep drift of snow, and he wandered long, lost and cold with frost, down the Wraith Stairs, down into the sunlit foothills.

Hearing the sound of water he bathed his blinded eyes in a Pool, an ancient water that had been blessed by Kaela long ago, and saw before him the sun shining on a deep, broad valley, brimming with green life, and the breeze brought to him the sweet scent of Farndonath, Dragon's Bane, shining in

the Fields of Flame along the swift river. And it seemed to him that the prayers of his people had been answered.

He stood there by that pool for a long while, as though carved from stone, and as the Bright Star rose in the heavens, Vorandor blessed the pool and sat down on a stone and sang a song of thankfulness, and a soft wind bore that song for many leagues. And the stone on which he sat became the Golden Knoll, a place of enchantment, and the Pool became a Seeing Water of great power.

Far away in the mountains Estea heard that voice, and amid the wailing of the people there was a silence and a wonder —then she took up that song and followed the voice down from the mountains and so they came at last to the green valley as the sun was rising.

Then Estea and Vorandor hallowed the valley and tended to their folk, and putting out what enchantment remained to them from Elvale whence they had come, they set a girdle of protection about the mountains. And Solveer, their enemy, knew not how his foes had escaped, for they vanished from the lands and were not seen again in that age.

The Coming of the Morndred

412-420 Valadria, Queen of Shand, brought down and imprisoned Valasne, ending the Great Winter. Valasne was locked in the Dawn Tower, in the Mountains of Morning, which came to be called the Serpent Tower, and guarded by a host of Strangers —but Arata eluded the Shandhost and escaped into the Wood of Seven. He laid spells about the deep valleys, and established a place of evil called Black Vale.

Here he gathered the greatest of evil spirits who yet remained in the world, and he called them the Morndred, or Dark Circle. Dare-kor was among them, and their hatred of the Four Kingdoms of Shand grew.

420-430 Though strong, Shand had suffered from the ending of the Firstpeace. The High Queen withdrew from the affairs of the rest of the world to heal her own realm's inner strife and hurt, which allowed the festering evil of the Black Vale to grow and spread. In the background, though, Turgal was developing into a military power to rival anything in Gandria, influenced by the cult of Gon-runin, part of the designs of Arata himself.

Valkurn and the Sword Sundergost

430-440 Valadria wedded Rolkurn of Miria, and they had a son, Valkurn the Golden-haired, who would be one day called Valkurn the Great. Valadria was a Queen of power, and for a long time she remained strong and looked defiantly towards the Black Vale where she knew evil festered. When her son Valkurn became lost there (being enchanted by one of the Morndred and seduced) the Queen cast herself into grief and became weak, bowing to the demands of the Morndred whose influence spread into the Middle Lands. Eventually she fled and hid herself in the Glade of the Seven Statues, close by the Black Vale in the vast Wood of Seven. Rolkurn pursued her but died of grief in his loss, for she was hidden from him by enchantments and the strange ways of that place. Here she stepped out of time into Raendu's Dance in the Glade.

440 Valkurn escaped and returned to Shand where he became Shand-King — but he often journeyed back to the Wood to seek his mother. Valkurn's son by bewitchment, Mallakurn, was born in the Black Vale and was brought to Valkurn in the night as his Heir of Shadows. Valkurn rejected him and swore vengeance on the Morndred who had so deceived him, and he rejected their ways forever and swore to bring about the downfall of the Morndred.

441 Valkurn challenged Arata at the gates of the Black Vale, but was envenomed by the Serpent King who showed him images of his mother held in a dungeon. Driven mad, he sought far and wide for her and was taunted by voices and signs put into his mind by Arata until he led a host against the Serpent Tower, where the evil Enchantress was held by the Strangers, the remnant of the wandering folk of the Four Enchanted Kingdoms. There he severed the hand of Bellandor the Stranger, guardian of the Enchantress, freeing her while believing her to be his mother. Bellandor was then slain by the Enchantress in her spider-form.

Bellandor begged him to put down the blade, seeing that he was in an enchantment, but Valkurn would not, and he took Bellandor's sword and cut through the binding webs and lo! the Enchantress was free!

And in her evil she had become like unto a monstrous black spider and she brushed Valkurn aside and poised to sting him — Bellandor took up his sword in his left hand and struck at her, but she slew him and fled. When Valkurn awoke from his stupor his mind was now cleared and he saw the way of the spell and how he had been deceived and such a wrath fell on him that, though the

people of the Guard were enraged at the loss of Bellandor and their other companions, they fell back from Valkurn as he left.

Valkurn, awakening from enchantment, wandered in the Mountains of Morning, and came at last to the Glade of the Seven Statues in the Wood of Seven and knew that his mother had left this mortal world forever and great was his grief and bewilderment, and he too wandered on the fringes of the Dance. In his absence, Mallakurn, son of Valkurn, was proclaimed High King of Shand by Arata the Serpent-King.

441-442 Valkurn found in that glade a crown of wood, and was spoken to by the statue of Raendu, which bade him journey to the Bay of the Green Archer on the coast of Hethrian, and there take a ship that would be waiting for him. He did so and disappeared from the affairs of the world for nearly a year, during which time Shand and the other lands of men fell into a dark decline as Arata, reunited with Valasne, called on their allies, and again created war and destruction across Gandria. The Morndred, through Mallakurn, ruled Shand, which stood by as the Middle Lands were one by one overrun.

442 Many people fled the Middle Lands to Silverian, while those who remained became slaves. Andron, King of Silverian, forbade the crossing of the Eastern Bridge, fearing the Plague, and his realm was shut.

The shadowed child Mallakurn was crowned Shand-King in league with Arata and Valasne, and the land was held in a propitiation to the evil realms of the Black Vale, and the Enchantress prepared to spin dark webs in the old High Hall of Shand.

Mallakurn meanwhile began to practice the Black Arts, saying to his people that only in this way could they hope to win peace with the forces which raged in the Middle Lands to the south.

Lankurn returned to his throne of Miria, now a decayed realm.

Shadowed Men and Dragons assailed the cities of Rondar and the other realms of the western Middle Lands; in the north, they raided Silverian, burning the King's Hills, and Kingstower was besieged. Lankurn was killed when defending the Halls of Shand from a Dragon. Andron died and the Starjewel of Silverian passed to his son, but Lundron grew restless and sought the Valley of Lankurn. He slept in the high passes, surrounded by Farndonath, the golden flower. Sindron, his son, became King, but the Star-jewel was lost.

While this conflict was taking place, Valkurn met Estran, the Herald of Raendu, on the far-off Isle of Flowers, last remnant of Malamirne, brought there by the call of Gulinol, which Estran had fetched from the depths of the sea. Estran and Valkurn brought the Sword of Mingost from the Dragonrealm. And Valkurn wore a crown of fire and a crown of water. Using the enchantments of the Sword and the Crown, Valkurn and Estran journeyed across the Middle Lands and Shand, spreading secret hope, until they reached the western borders of Miria and the lake known as Starwater.

Valkurn was attacked by his evil son Mallakurn, in the form of Vorn, Lord of Vampires, while he was blessing Mingost in the waters of Starwater. He escaped using the

Sword Mingost which was renamed the Sword Sundergost (the Sword of Hope).

443-445 Using the Sword at the Seat of Stonehammer, Valkurn rallied all the good peoples of Gandria and after the great War of the Sword which followed, Valasne and Arata withdrew and passed into the Underland. Valkurn rode to the Four Kingdoms of Shand and declared them free realms and swore vengeance on Valasne and Arata for all their evil, pledging the power of Sundergost to the cause of good. He then journeyed to the land of the Strangers and cast himself at the feet of Wellandor II saying that he relinquished his life in recompense for his slaying of Bellandor, but Wellandor "bade him rise, saying that he did not slay Bellandor, and Valkurn wept, and rose." Then Wellandor gave Valkurn the Cloak of Shadows and the enchanted harp of Nesandor to aid him in his quest.

Valkurn journeyed into the Underworld, coming through great peril with the aid of the Cloak and Harp to the Underhall itself, slaying both the Serpent King and the Enchantress, with Sundergost. He then wandered in the deep chambers, bewildered.

445 Dare-kor, servant of Arata and Valasne, fleeing before the fury of Sundergost, came to the roots of Wormstone in the Dark Isles, and there found the sleeping Third Drake. Summoning what remained of his power, he created an enchanted collar and chain, and, though the dragon burned him mortally, he began to use its blood to keep himself alive beyond the years due to him.

Estran confronted the spirits of Arata and Valasne and gave them a choice: to return with him back beyond the Wall

of Ice to the Tower of Garmon, leaving the world forever, or to dwell in the world stripped of power. They chose the latter, and fled bodiless to the Dark Isles, never again to take corporate form. Valkurn returned to the Throne of Shand, crowned with stone. He and Prince Aladron drove out the evil armies from Silverian and the Middle Lands and threw down the Serpent Tower, riding before a Crimson Company of knights dedicated to the battle against evil. A second Shandcrown was made from the four crowns of Water, Wood, Fire and Stone.

Before the end of that fateful year, though, the Black Usurper, Mallakurn, Valkurn's son, challenged his father's power in the Battle of the Free. Valkurn High King was slain by his son at his moment of victory and Sundergost was taken into safekeeping by Valkurn's long friend Estran, who returned it to the Hall of the Thrain in the Underworld, and then returned to the distant East whence he had come.

Valkurn's daughter Valnadia (445-470) wedded Aladron of Silverian.

The Mederothian

470-505 Their son Valadron ruled a United Kingdom. Evil was locked in the north, in Fretravorn, and there began a long Secondpeace of Gandria, also called the Golden Age of Shand, as is told in Mederothian, the Tale of the Seven Clans; Andronathian, Tale of Andron's House; and the Tale of the Alliance of Jewel, Crown and Sceptre.

530 Valadron died sixty years later, and Rolkurn II the Short-Lived came to the throne—he died while swimming in

Tellenwater as a child. Valadron's sister Shalporia ruled as Regent until Rolkurn's brother Umdorn came of age. Then Umdorn's daughter Sildavoll reigned from Ormrond in Silverian, (530-545) and became known as the White Queen because of her passion for the North. She was followed by her son, Valkurn II the Venturer (545-580). He set out on three great expeditions: to the Isle of Flowers in the east; west to Fretravorn; and through parts of the Great Western Waste, where he was lost.

The line of the Shandkings now passed to Eleraeon, (580-640) descendant of Shalporia, but the High Kingship was held in abeyance until Valkurn II or his heirs should return.

Bellandacost, son of Eleraeon (640-693) became known as Eleramain, in the Rondian fashion, since he loved Rondar and often dwelt there.

Wellandor the Fair —daughter of Bellandacost (693-759) and his Rondarian queen Wyndolain— was amongst the most beautiful of mortals, (759-800) and many bid for her hand from the Middle Lands and even Turgal, but she did not marry. With her, the seniority of the existing royal line of Shand passed to the House of Restonia, and Helca I, King of Restonia (800-820) was made Warden —but the Lords of the South Vale refused to acknowledge his overlordship, and his son Andracost ruled only as King of Restonia (820-850). He was succeeded by Helca II of Restonia (850-863).

Andracost, son of Helca, reigned next, (863-871) then his daughter Valadria II (871-905). The Shandcrown had been unworn and the High Throne empty for over a hundred years, but Valkurn II had been enchanted in the Western

Wood and had lived a long life and the line of the High Kings had remained true, though removed from the lands of men. The Ring of Shand was passed from heir to heir in the Wood.

The Eye of Gon-rinin

445-905 During all this time, Dare-kor established the remnants of the Morndred in the Citadel of the Four Winds, and began arming the pirates of the islands and gathering Shadowed Men there. The worship of Gon-rinin began again around this time. Also during this time, Dare-kor discovered the Jewel of Arazon and called it the Eye of Gon-rinin. It gave him power over the minds of mortals, but he was too afraid to use it himself, and plotted how he might deceive or misguide others with it, laying it about with many spells. He also formed an alliance with Kaddatar, Emperor of Turgal.

Valadria II wed Oromain of Rondar.

Alnacost the Tall (905-969) had a son, Bellacost I (969-1011) who abdicated as King of Restonia and Warden of Shand, and the crown passed to his brother Helca II, (1011-1034) who wed a lady of the Wanderers, Curinshaeal, and dwelt on the edge of the Wood of Seven, near the old mill of Tarthos — they gave birth there to Helca III (1034-1060). During his reign as Regent, the first large raids on Tara from the Dark Isles took place, and the Turgalin Ambassador was withdrawn from the High Court of Shand.

During the reign of Helca III, Turgal invaded the Middle Lands, but was swiftly repelled, largely through Helca's own valiant efforts. He disguised himself and travelled throughout the Middle Lands, uniting their kingdoms

against Turgal. Rondar remained free, and sent aid to Shand as Turgal was poised to strike into the Four Kingdoms. Helca died soon after the final victory against Turgal.

There followed the Kings of Restonia, Valkurn III (1060-1140) and Rolkurn III, (1140-1179) then Ellenain and Vandacost, sisters, who reigned jointly as Wardens (1179-1191). Ellenain's son was Lisaeon I (1191-1211) and his son was Bellacost II (1211-1232). He died childless.

The child of Bellacost's sister Rinaean, who was to be Vallamor, the next Warden, while on a journey to Rondar through the forest, was stolen by Carthogs (1230) and taken deep into the Great Western Wood and never seen again outside its eaves.

Maranain of Rondar

Maranain, (born 1210) Bearer of the Silver Standard of Rondar, had all his life been haunted by a great darkness holding within it a fire. He was part of the escort of Vallamor and when they were attacked by Carthogs he pursued Vallamor and wandered lost in the Western Wood where he met the Green Lady who told him that three times in his life it would seem two choices would lay before him and that this was the first choice: to seek for the King or to seek for the secret of the Darkness which haunted him. But each choice would lead down the same road, she said. She also said that if he looked in the waters of Kaela's Pool he would lose and gain sight —and she left him, and he made his First Choice: he looked in the waters of the Pool, and he saw the journey of Estran through the bright realm of Starland in the distant

East, and watched in a timeless wonder as the Herald recovered Gulinol and the Sword Mingost from the ruins under the sea, and he watched the unfolding of history in which Valkurn conquered the evil of the world. And it seemed to him that in his vision he was approached by Estran, Herald of Raendu, and given the Mantle of the Heralds (1230) —he knew that it was his destiny to return the High King to the Throne of Lond which would remain empty until his coming. But a great darkness, such as the darkness which swallowed Malamirne, lay between him and the accomplishment of that task, and he looked too deeply into it, and it burned him like fire.

While he was entranced there, Carthogs came upon him and put out his eye, but he fought them and slew them, and Vallamor escaped from them but ran off into the forest. Maranain wandered half-blind in the Wood and could not find the child, and he knew that he had made the wrong choice —for if he had refused to look into the Pool he would have found Vallamor the heir to the Throne of Lond. He resolved to follow Raendu, and the Green Lady and Raendu taught him the ways of the Heralds. When he finally emerged from the forest to return to Rondar, many years had passed by, but he seemed older again in wisdom and in body.

1230-1240 Vallamor grew up in the Great Western Wood and was fostered by the ancient people that lived there in secrecy, and took to wife the heir to the High Throne Valakaya, descendant of Valkurn II, who dwelt there.

1240 Ravena was born in the Western Wood, daughter of Vallamor and Valakaya —she was by direct lineage the heir to the High Throne.

1258 Ravena returned to dwell in Miria, and was welcomed there by King Pirian, who did not know at first of her lineage. Restonia had remained kingless and in grief at the loss of Vallamor, and many pondered the words of Maranain, who at this time emerged from the Western Wood and roamed in the world seeking Sundergost and the royal line —at this time he went to Wenfold and met its Warden, who had lived there since the days of Malamirne. He learned from the Warden of Estran's return to the Underworld with Sundergost after the Battle of the Free.

1250-1260 Dare-kor and the Morndred grew in power as Shand and the other kingdoms faded. They desired to destroy the line of the heirs of Shand, leaving its kingdoms weak and open to conquest. Dare-kor also plotted to use the power of the Eye to enslave the peoples of mankind and turn them to evil. But he had to drain the power and blood of the Third Drake in order to keep himself immortal and to hold at bay the fire of the dragon which consumed his body. To do this, he found that he needed more and more of the blood of the Worm, and he made sacrifices to it and fed it —but it was insatiable, and ate so much that Dare-kor's kingdom was weakened: but the Beast grew and grew until it became vast and its body wound its way under the foundations of the Citadel of the Four Winds which Dare-kor had built on the Isle of Wormstone.

1260 Ranatar, Emperor of Turgal, seduced by the Morndred, invaded the Middle Lands in great force and built an empire of blood. He ruled from the Cracked Thorn in the heart of Turgal, called Dendark.

1261 Queen Seneca, the sickly sister of Vallamor, accepted the throne in Restonia. Rondar stood against the Turgalin, but the kingdoms of Shand and Silverian were besieged. An end was made to the Secondpeace of Shand, as Reavers invaded Tara and Shadowed Men entered Shand's border regions. Lisaeon, son of Ravena, was born in Miria.

1230-1277 Maranain travelled the world, and was told by the remnants of the magical folk who dwelt in the Western Wood that they had fostered the child Ravena who was heir to the High Throne. Maranain rode to Miria where he saw Ravena on her death bed, aged only 37 —she had caught the Plague of the North, not being used to the harsher world outside the Wood. She told him of her son Lisaeon and the Princess Alagar.

1277 Lisaeon was the son of Ravena, who had emerged unlooked for from the Great Western Wood and had dwelt with King Pirian of the western realm of Miria. As a young man there, Lisaeon had met the Lady Alagar, daughter of the King of Valadria, and they fell in love and were wedded in the green hills of Miria on a fair summer's morning in 1276 —but he had taken his bride by night and ridden south to seek out Tarthos, on the edge of the wilderness, where years before Helca II, who had wed a lady of the Wanderers, Curinshaeal, had dwelt.

Maranain rode around the Four Kingdoms and called their kings and queens together and put to them what he had learned. Queen Wirrin of Miria, and Raegarth of Valadria and the Lords of the South Vale (who took no king but the High King in ages past) desired that this couple might be safe, so that they might yield an heir who might unite the

Four Kingdoms into one, as in the days of old, driving off the encroachers from the Middle Lands to the south. But fell Carthogs from the Underdarkness had been seen near Tarthos and Seleca, ancient Queen of Restonia, had now fallen under an evil enchantment, and her land was declining to ruin.

When the other kings and lords learned that Alagar was with child and yet dwelt in a valley perilously close to the edge of the realm, where evil lurked, they sent forth a guard at once to protect her in secret, against the word and wish of Seleca, and Maranain went with them. Lord Lisaeon indeed welcomed them at his house in the valley of the river Tarthos, for he was afraid for his lady and for the child, now that only the old Queen's guard were permitted to bear arms, even in self-defence. Under their protection the Lord agreed at last to leave Restonia and to return to Miria, but as they journeyed in secret through the winter they were waylaid by a mighty force of savage Shadowed Men and other creatures of the Underdarkness, who had crept up the valley hidden by fog. Maranain was almost killed—he was held by the captain of the host, Garathel Nightfang, and tortured, and Garathel showed him the horrors of the powers of evil and he was afraid and doubted Raendu.

Lord Lisaeon and his household were parted from their escort and driven south into the bewitched Wood of Seven, where they became lost and separated even from one another by the enchanted forest. For it was said that the dark wizards of the evil islands of the eastern sea knew also of the lineage of Lisaeon and Alagar, and had sent forth their power to destroy them and the hope they carried. Maranain knew not

how Dare-kor could have learned of the lineage of Alagar's child, and he was shaken by the Dragonlord's power.

1278 Ryna was born in the Wood of Seven with the likeness of her ancestor Valadria. She disappeared, and even Maranain believed that all the family had been slain when he found the graves and bodies of Lisaeon and Alagar in the forest. And this was his Second Choice, again to seek a child in the woods, but he was weak and had been drained of power and he chose wrongly again and withdrew into the wood, defying Raendu in his madness.

1278-1283 Ryna was reared in secret by the ancient people of the Wood, and brought to the old Lord Visaeon in Restonia when she was still a child.

1278-1280 Maranain was pursued north in despair of his mission —at this point he chose to ride away rather than toward the Wood where he hoped that one still remained of the royal line. He was attacked and driven into the mountains by a force of Shadowed Men and Turgalin mercenaries.

Had Maranain ridden through the barriers and pursued Ryna, he would have brought her to safety and she would have provided a rallying point for the Alliance —but as a result of his choice, Ryna grew up in ignorance and her path was different. Thus the whole episode of the Jewel might have been avoided.

The Herald fled before the mercenaries, called Wildweards, and came, as if by a miracle, to the hidden land of Vorandor's Valley. Once here had stood an ancient and beautiful city, but now a younger folk dwelt here in ignorance of all that passed in the outside world, and their

leader, Parthen Goldenbrow, welcomed Maranain the Standard Bearer, but he was forbidden to leave the Valley — for here was a haven from war and plague, untouched by the darkness without.

But Garathel Nightfang, captain of the Wildweard mercenaries, sought for Maranain for whom the Morndred had offered rich reward, and he also came into the Valley and put many to the sword —but Maranain, sick of war and in despair, stepped forth, becoming Garathel's deputy to stop the slaughter of the folk, and Garathel dwelt in the Valley that winter, and the fireblades of the Turgalins were kept idle.

1281 When spring came again, Garathel rode out to war, but bade Maranain stay and prepare the Valley to become his refuge and kingdom on his return; but many of the captain's men perished in the Battle of the Peak, Tain Gebralla, against the Besieged Kingdom, and he was mortally wounded, and, repentant, he was buried in the high pass near the Watchtree.

1281-1295 Maranain lived long in the Valley, and took to wife Selevie, whose hair was like the moon and sun, and she bore him a son Bralwain,(1285) who was called also Nawn, which means, in the tongue of the Valley, 'Hope'. And when Maranain was very old, (85) he took his leave of them and returned to the outside world —for he had seen again the face of Estran, and his quest summoned him, and he knew that in withdrawing from the Wood of Seven he had made a wrong choice.

1295 Helca IV of Restonia succeeded from his mother Queen Seleca in Restonia, even as Baladac the Black usurped the throne of Turgal from his father and brother. Galatar was forced to flee for his life, pursued by Shadowed Men into the

West. Helca re-formed the Crimson Company of legend in a bid to rekindle the fortunes of his realm, unaware that the heir to the High Throne of Lond dwelt in his castle, a seventeen-year-old girl.

1295 But Ryna, forbidden to join the Company, sought out Tarthos on the edge of the Wood of Seven, drawn there by a dim, haunting memory, and there she encountered Galatar, fleeing his Wildweard pursuers. Thus the heir of Turgal was brought into the court of the Warden of Shand, where it was decreed that the Crimson Company would ride out from Restonia to return Galatar to Turgal and to seek the advice of the Warden of Westfold. Ryna, secretly heir to the High Throne, went with them.

On the hazardous journey she was captured and taken before Baladac who revealed her to his masters through the Twisted Mirror. Ryna became entranced by the Mirror and believed its false image of her beauty.

The Mistress of Tara

1295-1297 As Maranain left the Hidden Valley, Baladac was commanded to withdraw from Tara by the Morndred. Ryna pursued him, finding and taking Sterreth from the Eye of Gon-runin in the heart of the Citadel of the Four Winds at Wormstone, and founded her own realm in Tara, as Dare-kor had designed, for she was under his spell. She closed the borders of Tara, and spurned the emissaries of Shand, even Maranain himself, coming in disguise as Tarazion. Shand was gradually besieged to the north and south. Syra was born in the High Houses of Tara,(1297) followed by Arime.

(1303) Lonia, daughter of Helca IV, was born in Restonia shortly afterwards.

1298-1315 Despite an ongoing internal conflict, Ryna could not shake off the influence of the Jewel, and failed to persuade Hrimae, her consort, to stay with her —he sailed east to do battle with the Reavers. He defeated them in battle, but was killed by Korreth, the Black Spear. Yarin, Earl Marshal of Tara, brought home the fleet. While the fleet was in the east, Ryna rode from Tara to Kirratamon and rid herself of Sterreth in the Pool of Tolsa with the help of Maranain.

When Ryna left the High Houses, the Reavers that Syra had called into the kingdom were already arriving in force — and Baladac, now Emperor of Turgal, waited in the Pass of the South with a great host, ready to wreak his revenge on the people of that land. But, as the High Houses were besieged, and Anyae looked out from the topmost tower to see a great fleet of Reaver ships from the east, suddenly his heart felt lighter, and a wind blew from the mountains, and, as Ryna divested herself of the Jewel Sterreth, hope returned to his heart and he saw that the fleet bore the banner of Hrimae, and that the swords of Tara had returned. The Reaver's ships at the Port of Alathosa were put to flame, and the Reaver host was cut off. Syra was captured, and Baladac was forced again to withdraw —but he gathered his hosts in the Middle Lands and bided his time.

1315 Calling himself Tarazion, Maranain then came to Tara to tutor Arime. He was too late to save Syra, who had already visited the Serpent Tower and was bewitched there. She secretly invited the Reavers back to Tara and betrayed

the Port of Alathosa to them. Tarazion took Arime secretly from the High Houses of Tara to Restonia, where he planned, as soon as Arime was old enough, to take the heir to the Throne of Lond to Wenfold and thence on the road to the Sword.

Arime met Lonia, daughter of Helca IV.

1319 One day they rode out of Helca's Castle to the Wood of Seven and encountered Wunderalga the Carthog there. They were rescued by Maranain and taken to Wenfold, and from there to the Green Door. Arime and Lonia emerged from the Underworld with Sundergost, but Maranain perished, saving Arime's life: this was his Third Choice, and he was convinced of its rightness and vindicated, even though he felt he would never see his wife or son again.

1320 Arime and Lonia returned to Tara, where Arime did battle with Baladac, and Lonia with Syra, who died while with Baladac's child. Galatar returned to the West with a Turgal fleet, and Baladac and his forces were driven from Tara. Arime led the hosts of the West to the defeat of the forces of the Morndred in Shand.

For a while there was peace in Shand again, but Arime was restless. His kingdoms united, but he refused to be crowned High King until he had received some kind of sign. And Maranain had spoken of a Darkness at the end of the road which was as yet unconquered.

1325 He wandered in the forests of Miria one autumn evening, and the Hooded Man stole Lonia from his side. He stumbled, lost, into the hidden Valley of Sheft in mid-winter. He was discovered there by Maranain's son Nawn, but neither knew the other.

1326 Nawn and Arime, who had forgotten his own identity, set out on the journey back into Shand, and after several adventures which served to prompt Arime's memory, he returned to Shandhall and then travelled on to the Green Door and into the Underworld. With Nawn, he reached Wormstone and confronted Dare-kor and rescued Lonia — but it was Nawn, with Sundergost, who severed the Dragonlord's link with the Third Drake and brought about the final downfall of the Morndred and the collapse of Wormstone.

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This is a book every author should own. Grant P. Hudson does an outstanding job explaining story structure and the mechanics involved in creating a story or novel that readers will love. His examples are explained in an engaging manner so this book doesn't seem like reading a text book. I have already implemented many of his ideas in building a novel. This book contains great advice and I highly recommend it to all authors.

-D. T. (Author)

After reading this book, I'll never look at stories the same way. This step-by-step how-to book is full of wisdom about how classic stories are structured. You will see how to apply these principles to your own stories and novels, converting them to page-turners.

-P. V. A. (Author)

An essential purchase for anyone wishing to not only improve their writing but understand the art of story telling. You will never read a book the same way again. Nor watch a film or play without seeing the theory, that Grant so eloquently describes. Brilliant, worth every penny.

-D. S. (Author)

I have had nearly 100 short stories published and thought I knew about writing. This book taught me new ways to look at my own writing as well as other writing. Grant Hudson doesn't recycle old ways to look at the writing process, he invents new ways for a writer to examine almost every aspect of writing fiction, and provides a new vocabulary for how to do it. Very highly recommended for anyone who writes or wants to write fiction.

-A. C. (Author)

I wish I had found this book sooner. It was fascinating and insightful. I am now very annoying when watching films as I apply the techniques learned in this book, and quickly guess the twists! Very helpful in planning and forming ideas and I use this technique when writing stories.

-S. C. (Author)

I love the way Grant has approached the whole subject in this excellent book, in a very different and almost 'obvious' way compared to other books that attempt to teach the craft of writing. As a writer myself I now see in a different light what I am writing. Where was this book 35 years ago when I first started writing? One of those 'I wish I'd known that years ago' books.

-J. W. F. (Author)

I finished this book over two nights and had an epiphany. Such common sense and thought provoking ideas. This should be a mandatory text book for any serious writer. I'm excited to inject more purpose to my writing. This book will become a constant reference book for me now. Highly recommend it.

-R. C. (Author)

Your book is teaching me all the stuff that the other books don't! I can learn all about three-act structures and all that stuff elsewhere -this book is telling me exactly what to put INTO the structure! It makes writing so easy and you can immediately spot where you're going wrong! Excellent!

-L.J. (Professional)

This is an absolutely amazing achievement! I highly recommend it to anyone interested in writing fiction.

-T.R. (Student)

I was extremely impressed. This is not idle flattery. You've done a superb job in uncovering the factors that go into making a great piece of literature.

-B.R. (Executive)