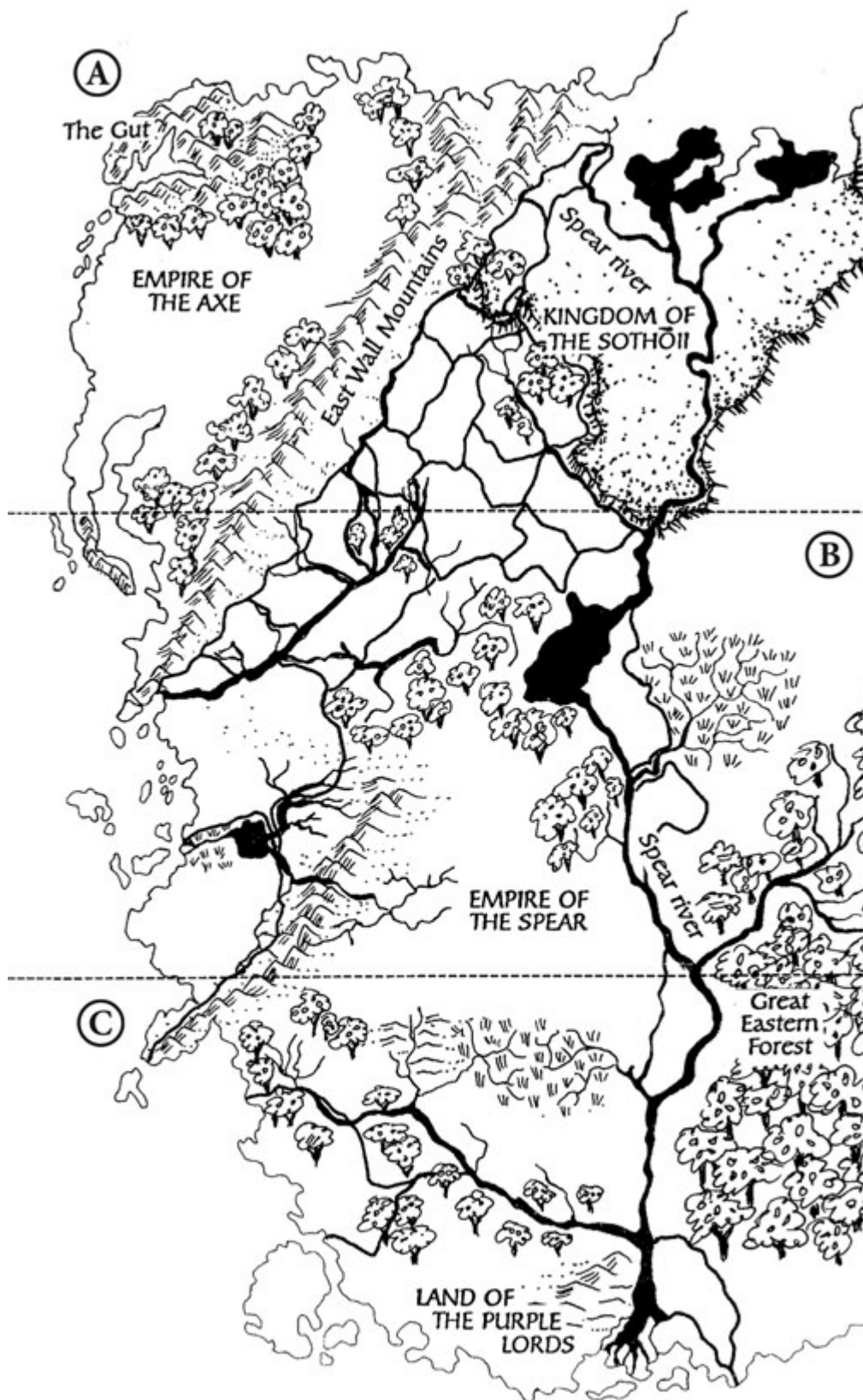


Oath of Swords

(ARC)

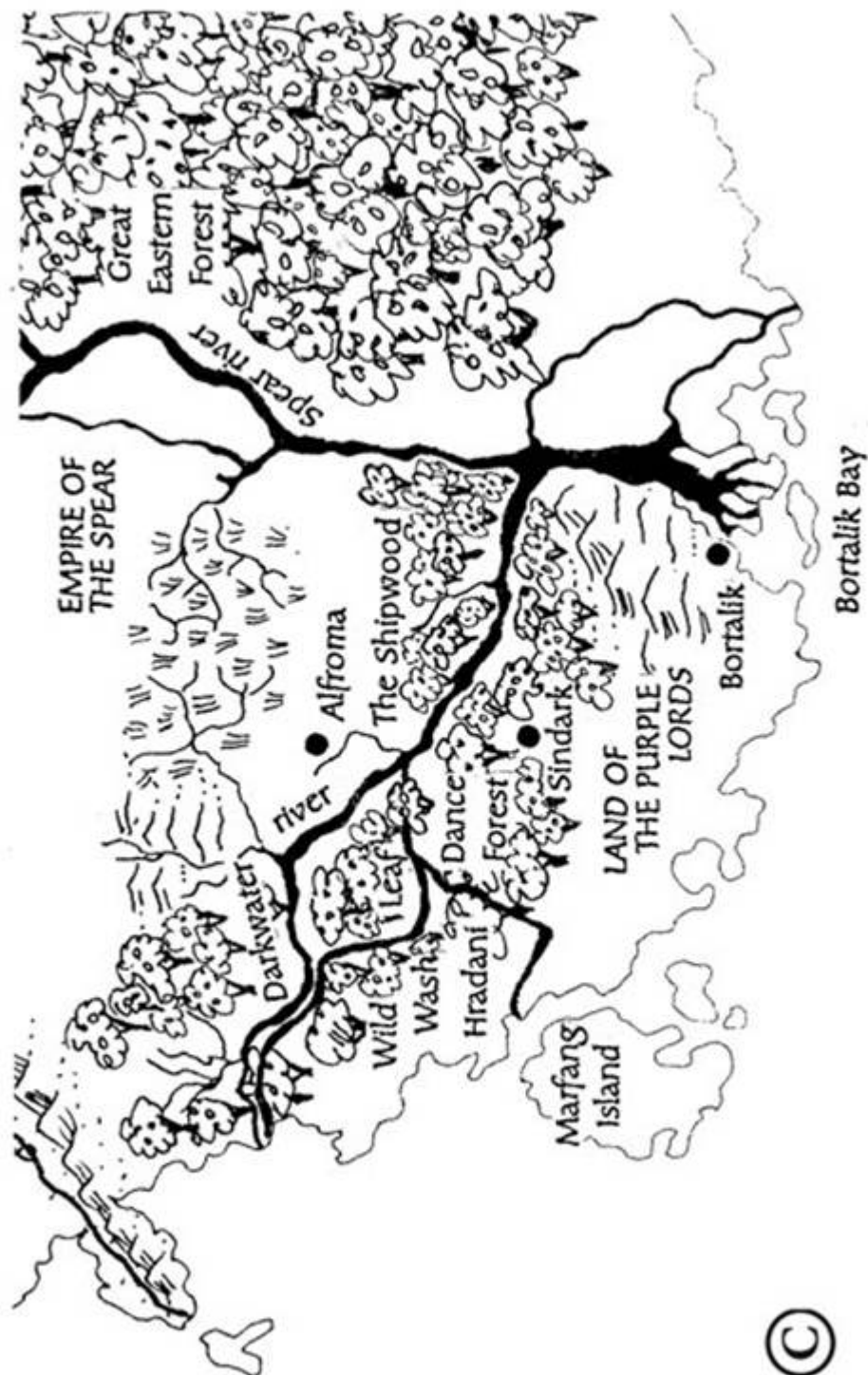
Bahzel 04

David Weber









Epigraph

hradani(hrä-dä-ne)*n* . (1) One of the original Five Races of Man, noted for foxlike ears, great stature and physical strength, and violence of temperament. (2) A barbarian or berserker. (3) Scum, brigand.

adj. (1) Of or pertaining to the hradani race. (2) Dangerous, bloodthirsty or cruel. (3) Treacherous, not to be trusted. (4) Incapable of civilized conduct. [Old Kontovaran: from *hra* , calm + *danahi* , fox.]

Rage, the (rag)*n* . Hradani term for the uncontrollable berserk bloodlust afflicting their people. Held by some scholars to be the result of black sorcery dating from the Fall of Kontovar(*q.v.*).

Strictures of Ottovar (**stri**k-cherz uv äh-to-**vär**)*n* . Ancient code of white wizardry enforced by Council of Ottovar in pre-Fall Kontovar. The Strictures are said to have prohibited blood magic or the use of sorcery against non-wizards, and violation of its provisions was a capital offense. It is said that the wild wizard(*q.v.*) Wencit of Rum, last Lord of the Council of Ottovar prior to the Fall, still lives and attempts to enforce them with the aid of the Order of Semkirk.

—New Manhome Encyclopedic
Dictionary of Norfressan Languages,
Royal and Imperial Press:
KingKormakCollege, Manhome.

SWORD BROTHER

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"Sword Brother"

I

He was thinking about snow when it happened.

He really ought to have been getting his mind totally focused on the task at hand, but the temperature had topped 110° that afternoon, and even now, with the sun well down, it was still in the nineties. That was more than enough to make any man dream about being some place cooler, even if it had been—what? Three years since he'd really seen snow?

No, he corrected himself with a familiar pang of anguish. *Two and a half years . . . since that final skiing trip with Gwynn .*

Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Houghton's jaw tightened. After so long the pain should have eased, but it hadn't. Or perhaps it had. Right after he'd received word about the accident, it had been so vast, so terrible, it had threatened to suck him under like some black, freezing tide. Now it was only a wound which would never heal.

The thought ran below the surface of his mind as he stood in the commander's hatch on the right side of the LAV's flat-topped turret and gazed out into the night. As the senior noncom in Lieutenant Alvarez' platoon, Houghton commanded the number two LAV (unofficially known as "Tough Mama" by her crew), with PFC Jack Mashita as his driver and Corporal Diego Santander as his gunner. Tough Mama was technically an LAV-25, a Light Armored Vehicle based on the Canadian-built MOWAG Piranha, an eight-wheel amphibious vehicle, armored against small arms fire and armed with an M242 25-millimeter Bushmaster chain gun and a coaxial M240 7.62-millimeter machine gun. A second M240 was pintle-mounted at the commander's station, and Tough Mama was capable of speeds of over sixty miles per hour on decent roads. She drank JP-8 diesel fuel, and technically, had an operational range of

over four hundred miles in four-wheel drive. In eight-wheel drive, range fell rapidly, and the original LAVs had been infamous for leaky fuel tanks which had reduced nominal range even further. The most recent service life extension program seemed to have finally gotten on top of that problem, at least.

At the moment, Mashita was sitting behind the wheel, with the big Detroit Diesel engine to his immediate right and his head and shoulders sticking up through the hatch above his compartment. The twenty-year old private had just finished checking all of the fluid levels—which he'd do again, every time the vehicle stopped. Santander was standing to one side, jaw methodically working on a huge wad of gum, as he spoke quietly with Corporal Levi Johnson, the senior of their evening's passengers. The four-man recon section they were responsible for transporting and supporting had already stowed most of its gear aboard, and Houghton reminded himself to check the tunnel from the LAV's driver's compartment to the troop compartment before they actually headed out. It was *supposed* to be kept clear at all times, but people had a habit of protecting equipment and gear from damage by stowing it in the tunnel, rather than stowing it in the open-sided bin mounted on the back of the turret or lashing it to the outside of the vehicle, the way they were supposed to.

Houghton had already completed all of his other pre-mission checks. Fuel, battery, ammo, night-vision, thermal sights, commo, personal weapons . . . He still had a good twenty minutes before they were scheduled to leave, but he and his crew were firm believers in staying well ahead of deadlines.

Never hurts to be ready *sooner than you have to*, he reflected, the back of his mind still visualizing the silent, steady sweep of snowflakes. *It sure as hell beats the alternative, anyway! And the LT won't like it if something screws up while—*

That was when it happened.

The universe went abruptly, shockingly gray. Not black, not foggy, not hazy—*gray*. His brain insisted that the featureless grayness which had enveloped him was almost painfully bright, but his pupils and optic nerve were equally insistent that the light level hadn't changed at all. His hands death-locked on the rim of the commander's hatch as the fourteen-ton LAV seemed to fall out from under him, yet even as that sickening sense of freefall swept over him, he knew he hadn't actually moved at all.

After sixteen years in the Corps, Ken Houghton figured he'd seen and experienced just about anything that was likely to come a Marine's way. *This* was something else entirely, though—something human senses had never been intended to grasp or describe—and a burst of something far too much like panic blazed through him.

It seemed to go on for hours, but there also seemed to be something wrong with his time sense. He couldn't seem to speak, didn't even seem to be breathing, yet he managed to look down at his wristwatch, and the digital display was crawling, crawling. He could have counted to ten—slowly—in the time it took each crawling second to limp into eternity. Two agonizingly slow minutes dragged by. Then three. Five. Ten. And then, as suddenly as the universe's colors had disappeared, they were back.

But they were the *wrong* colors.

The tans and grays and sun-blasted browns of the Middle East were gone. And so was the night. The LAV sat on a gently sloping hillside covered in prairie grasses three or four feet tall under a sun that was still at least two or three hours short of setting.

Houghton heard Mashita's deep, explosive grunt of astonishment over the helmet commo link, but the gunnery sergeant hadn't needed that to tell him they weren't in Kansas anymore.

Houghton stared in stupefied disbelief at the high, crystalline blue sky, felt the autumnal chill in the slight breeze cooling the sweat on his desert-bronzed face, heard the birds that shouldn't have been there, and wondered what *thehell* had happened. He turned his head slowly, and that was when he saw the tall, white-haired man with the peculiar eyes standing almost directly behind the LAV.

Wencit of Rûm looked up in astonishment as the bizarre, sand-colored vehicle—and it obviously was a vehicle, even if he'd never seen anything like it—blinked into existence. It certainly wasn't what he'd expected.

Of course, judging from the expression of the redhaired man standing up in the opening on top of it, Wencit wasn't the only one who'd been surprised.

The man in question turned his head far enough to see Wencit, and his green eyes narrowed suddenly. His right hand flashed around to his left side, out of sight for a moment from where Wencit stood, then reappeared holding something else Wencit had never seen before. From the way the newcomer had turned to point it in his direction, though, it had to be a weapon of some sort, and probably a most unpleasant one.

Wencit decided it would be a very good idea to keep his own hand well away from the hilt of his sword as he gazed up at the redhead.

"Who the hell are *you*?" the man in the vehicle demanded hoarsely. His lips didn't move in exact time with the voice Wencit heard (and understood), and the wizard noted that at least the language aspects of the spell had worked properly.

"My name is Wencit of Rûm," he said, speaking slowly and clearly, and it was obvious from the other's expression that he understood Wencit as well as Wencit understood him.

The redhead bent his head briefly, muttering something Wencit couldn't quite hear, then climbed slowly and carefully out of the hatch in which he'd stood. He never took his eyes off Wencit any more than he allowed his weapon's point of aim to shift, and Wencit took the opportunity to study him more closely, in turn.

The bulky helmet was made of some material Wencit had never seen before but which must be quite light, judging from the way he moved. And the newcomer wore what was obviously a uniform. It was well-equipped with sensibly arranged pockets, although its outlandish pattern of tan, gray, and sand-colored blotches seemed incredibly out of place in his current setting.

And his vehicle *doesn't look out of place*, Wencit? the wizard asked himself dryly.

"Where are we?" the redhaired man asked, and Wencit was impressed. The stranger's voice was taut, obviously more than a little confused, but he was tightly focused, ignoring all the things which must have been frightening, if not outright terrifying, while he concentrated on the essentials.

"You're in the Empire of the Spear," Wencit told him. "Between Darkwater Marsh and the Shipwood, west of the Spear River."

Gunnery Sergeant Houghton's eyes narrowed as the lunatic facing him responded with perfectly rational sounding gibberish. The lunatic in question couldn't be as old as the white beard and hair suggested—not with the hard-trained muscle visible in his arms and those strong, sinewy wrists. In fact, he looked like a case of bad casting for a low-budget fantasy movie. Obviously, they'd picked someone too young for the part and tried to use makeup to make him look older, but somehow Houghton felt certain the answer wasn't quite that simple. The scuffed leather doublet, tall horseman's boots, and scruffy look which could only come with days spent in the field were too authentic for that. For that matter, the sword at his side looked well-worn and serviceable.

Now the old fellow stood there, head cocked slightly to one side, waiting patiently, as if what he'd just said actually made some sort of sense. And as Houghton's brain began working again, he realized just how peculiar the other man actually looked. It wasn't just the dichotomy between his apparent age and physical fitness, nor his height, although Houghton wasn't accustomed to seeing all that many men who matched his own six-feet-four. *Thereally* weird thing about him was his eyes.

Kenneth Houghton had never imagined anything like the flickering, wavering, multi-colored wildfire which danced slowly and endlessly under the stranger's snow-white eyebrows. It didn't dance *infront* of his eyes; it filled the sockets themselves, sending little prominences of witchfire curling up higher than his lids, but how in God's name could anyone have eyes that looked like *that*? And how could anyone who did possibly *see* through them?

The questions flickered through his mind, but the muzzle of his Springfield XD .45 stayed rock-steady on the other man's chest. The polymer framed pistol wasn't standard issue, but when a man had knocked around the Corps as long as Houghton had, he could get by with a few personal preferences. He liked the automatic's ergonomics and controls . . . and its stopping power and fourteen-round magazine capacity. Both of which, at the moment, he found ever so comforting.

"How did we get here?" he asked harshly, challengingly. Somehow he was certain the man facing him was responsible for the impossible transition.

"I'm afraid that's my fault," the flame-eyed stranger admitted. "I was looking for help, but —" Houghton had the impression that the eyes he couldn't quite see behind that wavering glare had narrowed "— I certainly didn't expect to get *you* ."

"What d' you mean by that?" Houghton demanded.

"*That's* going to be just a little difficult to explain," Wencit said, then shrugged. "If you want to stand here and keep pointing your weapon—I assume it is a weapon?—at me while we talk, I suppose we can. Or we can sit down by my fire over there and enjoy a mug of tea during the conversation, instead."

He twitched his head sideways, at the neat campfire burning in the carefully built turf fireplace and the warhorse tearing steadily at the tall grass to one side of the area he'd tramped down for his camp. The stranger's eyes followed the movement for an instant, then flicked back to Wencit.

"I think we *will* stand here, at least for now," he said. "And, yes. It's a weapon."

"I rather thought it must be." Wencit smiled crookedly. "I don't suppose I should have expected any other reaction out of you, especially under these circumstances." He waved one hand in a slight arc, indicating both the bizarre vehicle and the grasslands stretching away in all directions.

"No, you shouldn't. And," the other man's voice hardened slightly, "I'm still waiting for that explanation."

"So I see. Very well, the short version is that a friend of mine is about to run into a situation which is even more dangerous than he realizes. There's more going on than I suspect he knows, and his enemies are rather more powerful than he's been given cause to expect. I happen to have been following some of those enemies for reasons of my own, which is how I know what's happening. So, I cast a spell of summoning, seeking allies. Obviously it fastened on *you*, for some reason, although you and this peculiar . . . wagon of yours," he indicated the vehicle once more, "are nothing at all like what I expected to answer me."

Houghton understood the words just fine, despite the fact that they were obvious and arrant nonsense.

Stop that! he told himself. *It may sound crazy, all right, but do you have any better explanation, Ken?*

"What's a 'spell of summoning'?" he heard himself asking.

"It's a spell which is supposed to be very carefully keyed to a specific entity or type of entity," Wencit replied. "The caster—me, in this case—sets up the qualities and . . . personality, for want of a better word, for the entity he hopes to summon. The spell is designed to find someone—or, sometimes, some *thing*—which matches what the wizard has specified."

"And—assuming for a moment that I believed any of this—it just yanks whoever you point it at to where you want him, is that it?" The sharp edge of anger, honed, undoubtedly, by perfectly understandable fear and confusion, was unmistakable, and Wencit shook his head.

"As a matter of fact, no," he said calmly. "I adhere to the Strictures of Ottovar, and the Strictures are very clear on that point. No wizard may coerce any other being or entity into obeying his demands except in certain very carefully specified instances of self-defense, or in equally specific instances of the defense of others. I have absolutely no idea why my spell might have brought you here so abruptly. In fact, it shouldn't have brought you here at all, unless you were *willing* to come."

"Well in that case," the redhead said grimly, "I suggest you just send Jack and me back where we came from, since it's for damned sure that neither one of us volunteered for this little excursion of yours."

"There's someone else in the vehicle?" Wencit's dismay wasn't at all feigned.

"Of course there is! You don't think I run the whole damned track by myself, do you?"

"I don't know," Wencit said frankly. "I don't know anything more about you and your vehicle or your companion than it would appear *you* know about sorcery. But the fact that someone else came with you is only one more indication that something must have gone badly awry with my spellcasting. I was seeking only a single individual."

"You were, huh? If this friend of yours is in such deep shit, why'd you only ask for one person to help out? What? You were expecting ClarkKent?"

"I have no idea who 'ClarkKent' might be," Wencit replied, wrapping his tongue around the odd-sounding name with care. "What I was hoping I might manage to convince to come help me was a gryphon."

"A gryphon?" Against his will, Houghton was beginning to believe the fiery-eyed old man was telling him

the truth about how he, Mashita, and Tough Mama had gotten here. Wherever the hell "*here*" might be!

"You mean one of those lion-mixed-with-an-eagle critters?" He snorted a laugh. "Hell, why settle for something like that? Why not go whole hog and 'summon' a frigging *dragon*?"

"It takes too long to explain things to dragons," the oldster replied reasonably. "Or, rather, to convince them they ought to get involved. By the time they get done searching the time stream and philosophizing, it's usually too late to accomplish much. Then there's the little problem that most of them aren't very happy about having anything to do with even a white wizard these days. But mostly, frankly, because I needed something as powerful as I could get."

Houghton stared at him for a moment longer, then sighed. It was all totally insane, of course. Unfortunately, it actually seemed to be happening to him.

He engaged the pistol's safety and slid it back into the shoulder holster under his left arm. Then he removed his helmet and tucked his left elbow around it while the cool breeze swept over hair still wet with Middle Eastern sweat.

"You realize, of course," he said conversationally, "that I think you're probably nutty as a fruitcake. On the other hand, I don't have any better explanation for what the hell is going on here. In fact, at the moment, you seem to be the only game in town when it comes to answers. And presumably, if you got us here, you can send us home again, too."

"Of course I can," Wencit agreed, and saw the other man relax, at least a little. "Unfortunately, I can't simply turn around and do it with a snap of my fingers," he continued, and grimaced mentally as the momentary relaxation disappeared.

"And why might that be?" the other man growled suspiciously.

"It's a complex spell," Wencit said apologetically. "It takes time to prepare for it, and that's especially true in this case. Since you aren't remotely what or who I anticipated, I'll have to be very careful in specifying where you're supposed to go. It's my fault you're here, and if I send you home, that's where I want you to go. I certainly don't want to end up just dropping you into still another world that isn't yours."

"I see." Houghton knew his tone sounded grudging. Which, now that he thought about it, was just too bad. The old guy was right—it *was* his fault Houghton and Mashita had ended up wherever the hell they were. Still, he reminded himself, the other man—the *wizard*, he supposed—seemed to be willing to acknowledge his responsibility and do his best to make things right again.

"My name's Houghton," he heard himself saying. "Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Houghton, US Marines."

"Houghton?" the other man repeated, as if the name felt peculiar in his mouth. Then he shook himself. "Men call me Wencit of Rûm," he said.

"Well then, Wencit," Houghton said, "how soon can we get started on this 'complex spell' of yours?"

"Not for at least several hours," Wencit replied. "As I said, I'd expected to summon my ally from this universe; it never occurred to me that I might end up reaching over into another one. Unfortunately, it did. Since I hadn't expected that, I didn't include a command to identify the one you came from, and the spell's set up a ripple pattern in the magic field. I'm going to have to give it time to settle a bit before I can start looking for the traces that will guide me to your universe."

"Myuniverse?" Houghton shook his head. "You're telling me I'm in an entirely differentuniverse?"

"Obviously," Wencit replied. Another wave of his hand indicated Houghton's uniform and equipment harness and Tough Mama, sitting on the grass behind him and Mashita—who'd climbed up onto the decking through his hatch—ñ looming up on the far side of the turret. Then the same hand indicated Wencit's own clothing, the campfire, and the magnificent horse grazing nearby. "I may not recognize your vehicle, Kenneth Houghton," he said, "but wouldn't you say it seems just a bit out of place here?"

"I guess you could put it that way," Houghton admitted, and glanced over his shoulder at Mashita.

The private had obviously been listening to the early stages of at least Houghton's side of the conversation over his helmet commo link. Now the short, wiry Nisei shrugged and settled himself casually on top of the turret beside the M240 machine gun at the commander's station. It put him close enough to listen to Houghton's conversation with their . . . host, and despite this Wencit's apparent sincerity, it didn't bother Houghton a bit to have the machine gun manned, just in case.

"So, we're in another universe," he said, turning back to Wencit. "What is it? One of those 'parallel universes' the science-fiction writers are so fond of?"

"I'm not familiar with 'science-fiction writers,' Kenneth Houghton," Wencit replied. "But to call our universes 'parallel,' might actually be a good way to describe it. Or, at least, as good a way as I've ever heard anyone else suggest."

"It's Ken, not Kenneth," Houghton said. His voice was harsher than he'd intended as a familiar stab of remembered loss went through him. He'd always disliked his first name. In fact, Gwynn was the only one who had ever been able to call him "Kenneth" without making him feel like some sort of dweeb.

"Ken?" Wencit repeated, then made a sound suspiciously like a chuckle.

"Well,Ken," he said after a moment, "as I was saying, our universes may not precisely be 'parallel,' but time is proceeding at the same rate and in the same direction in both of them. I suppose the best way to describe the differences between them is to say that each of our universes was formed out of the many differing possible outcomes of an inconceivable number of separate events. Judging from your appearance, your equipment, and the fact that sorcery is obviously as strange to you as your equipment appears to me,*our* universes must have diverged long, long ago.

"Which," he continued in a more serious tone, "leaves me even more puzzled about how my spell could have reached so far afield from its intended destination. And how you could have arrived in the flesh, as it were. Usually, when you try to move people between universes, all you actually manage to summon is a shadowman, a sort of . . . doppelganger, I suppose you'd call it, rather than the actual individual. I'm almost beginning to wonder if someone else didn't have a finger in this particular pie."

"You know . . . Wencit," Houghton said, "the thing that worries me most right this minute is that I'm starting to feel like you're actually making sense."

Wencit chuckled at Houghton's desert-dry tone. Then he shook his head again.

"You said you were a 'gunnery sergeant,'" he said. "That's a military rank, yes?"

"Yeah. A gunnery sergeant is the senior noncom in a platoon of Marines," Houghton said.

"Ah. I thought it must be something like that. And this." The wild wizard gestured at the peculiar, bulky, massive vehicle again. "This entire wagon, or whatever. It's a weapon, isn't it?"

"It's armed," Houghton conceded warily, one eyebrow quirked. He folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head. "It's not exactly a main battle tank, but I'd guess it could hold its own against anything we're likely to encounter here."

"I see."

Wencit rubbed his neatly trimmed white beard for a moment, then grimaced.

"Gunnery Sergeant," he said earnestly, "as I say, you aren't at all what I expected. But if you and your friend—" a nod of his head indicated Mashita, still sitting atop the eight-wheeled vehicle "—are both soldiers, perhaps the spell that brought you here did better than I first thought."

"Just a minute, now, Wencit!" Houghton said. He recognized that tone. It was the kind of tone officers—or, still worse, civilian intelligence pukes or even *Air Force* officers—used when they needed someone to volunteer for some perfectly stupid frigging op.

The wizard stopped speaking and regarded him steadily. Or, at least, Houghton *thought* it was steadily. It was amazing how hard it was to read someone's expression when you couldn't actually see their eyes.

"I'm sure you wouldn't have 'summoned' us—or the gryphon you were trying to get, anyway—unless the shit had really hit the fan. And for all I know, you're a perfectly nice guy, with a perfectly legitimate reason for looking for any help you can get. But like you say, this isn't *your* universe, and Jack and I have responsibilities of our own back home."

"I realize that," Wencit said earnestly. "But at the same time, don't good men have the *same* responsibilities, wherever they may find themselves?"

"Don't go there," Houghton cautioned, shaking his head firmly. "Every time I've gotten into trouble in my life, it's been because someone convinced me it was the 'right thing to do.' It's not going to work this time."

"So you're not even curious about why you wound up here?"

"I didn't say that. I just said that what Jack and I need to do is to get back to where our own people are waiting on us for the operation we were about to mount. Trust me, Wencit, we've got more than enough shit of our own to deal with back home."

"Really?" Wencit crossed his own arms and settled back on his heels. "You're at war, then?"

"Yeah, we are," Houghton agreed bleakly. "Took us a while to figure it out. And we screwed up along the way, more than once. But that's what we are."

"What kind of war?"

"Ha! It's gonna take more than a few hours to answer *that* one! Let's just say we're up against a bunch of certified looney-tunes who're more than willing to murder as many civilians as it takes to make their point. And," he conceded grudgingly, "a lot of them are perfectly willing to die themselves along the way."

The tall red-haired "gunnery sergeant's" voice had gone flat and hard, Wencit noticed. He rather doubted Houghton realized just how true that was, but it confirmed several things Wencit had already suspected about him.

"You sound like a man who's seen too much bloodshed, Ken Houghton," he said quietly. "Too many innocent dead."

Houghton's jaw muscles clenched hard for a moment. Then he inhaled deeply.

"Damned straight I have." His voice was as quiet as Wencit's own, but burred with anger and the ashes and clinkers of old hatred. "Not all of them from the other side's efforts, either," he continued. "I don't know about wars here, but the one we're fighting back home is a copperplated bitch. We do our best to minimize civilian casualties, but how the hell do you do that when the other side fades into the rest of the civilian population? When you're doing your goddamned fighting right in the middle of a frigging city?"

He shook his head hard, and Wencit nodded.

"It's the children, isn't it?" he asked gently. "It's the children that make it hurt so badly."

Kenneth Houghton's nostrils flared as he heard the sympathy—the *understanding*—in Wencit's voice. Somehow, he knew, the old man, the wizard, truly did understand. And because he knew that, the gunnery sergeant found himself admitting the truth.

"Yeah. It's the kids." His jaw tightened once more. "It's everybody caught in the mess, but especially the kids. They never asked for any of it, never got to choose. If it was just us against the bad guys, out in the open, one-on-one, that'd be one thing. But it isn't. And I don't guess it can be, really. We call it cowardly, and maybe it is. But it's also what they call 'asymmetrical warfare.'" He grunted a harsh, bitter laugh. "They're not about to come out where we can blow their asses off, because they know they can't possibly fight our kind of war and win. So instead, we have to fight their kind. And the more civilian casualties that get inflicted, the better it works out for *their* plans. After all, we're the ones in their cities. If somebody gets killed, who are the locals going to blame for it?"

"You're tired," Wencit said. Houghton looked at him, and the wizard smiled crookedly. "Not physically, perhaps. But tired—so tired—of seeing the innocent killed."

"What?" Houghton tried to rally. "You're a mind reader, too?"

"No, I'm a wizard, not a mage. But I don't have to be able to read your mind. Not to see that truth, Gunnery Sergeant Houghton. Trust me," the smile went even more crooked for a moment, "even if we've never met before, I recognize the kind of man you are. I've known others like you. Too many of them, I think sometimes."

"And?" Houghton said when the wizard paused again. A little warning bell was trying to sound deep inside Houghton's brain. Somehow the conversation was slipping out of his control, going places he'd never intended it to go. He'd *dintended* to maintain his focus on the demand that he and Mashita be sent back to their own universe, yet something inside him knew it was going in another direction entirely. And something else inside him couldn't resist that changing destination.

"And I'm afraid I'm about to lose another one of them," Wencit said. "A good man, one with a sense of responsibility, who's already seen and faced enough evil for any other man's entire lifetime. I think you'd

like him, if you ever met."

"And you're about to invite me to do just that, aren't you?" Houghton said. It was a challenge, but without the edge of confrontation Wencit had half-expected. "You're going to suggest that I ought to go ahead and help him—and you—out, like one good, responsible man to another."

"Something like that," Wencit admitted.

"I don't think so," Houghton responded. But his tone wasn't quite as firm as he'd wanted it to be.

"You've said you're fighting an ugly war back home," Wencit said. "So am I, my friend, and I'll wager I've been fighting it even longer than you have. A lot longer, in fact. I know what it is to have blood on your hands. To lose friends, comrades. To see the innocent caught in the middle of all the carnage—to wonder if your efforts aren't actually making it *worse*. If at least a part of you isn't becoming the very thing you're fighting. That's what I'm doing out here in the middle of nowhere, the reason I cast the spell that ended up bringing you and your friend here, as well."

"I'll take your word for it," Houghton said. "It's still not *my* war."

"No?" Wencit cocked his head. "Maybe it is. Surely, evil is much the same in every universe, isn't it? And —" he looked directly into Houghton's green eyes "— quite a lot of children have already died in my war, as well. And more of them will die very soon now, if it isn't stopped."

"Shit happens." It was supposed to come out hard, uncaring.

It failed.

"Yes, it does," Wencit said. "May I at least show you what I'm talking about here?"

Houghton knew better. He *knew* better, and yet someone else seemed to have control of his voice.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead. Trot it out, but you're gonna have to go some to beat the kind of shit I've already seen."

"Am I?"

Wencit smiled oddly, and then his hands moved. They sketched an immaterial square in the air, about chest height, four feet or so across, and two or three tall. Houghton frowned and started to open his mouth to ask him what he thought he was doing, but then the air in the square Wencit's hands had defined seemed to ripple abruptly.

The Marine's mouth snapped shut again as the ripple effect cleared as suddenly as it had appeared. In its place were images—sharp, as crystal-clear as any video screen or television Houghton had ever seen. And, as he saw them, Houghton felt a sudden, total confidence that what he was seeing was an actual, faithful record of what had truly happened.

It was one of the most horrific things he had ever seen.

Kenneth Houghton had seen men, women, and children mangled and mutilated by "improvised explosive devices," by mortar and rocket fire, by artillery shells, bombs, machine-gun fire, and small arms. He'd seen the horror napalm left behind, the indescribable burns of white phosphorus. Yet this . . .

He stared at Wencit's images and saw brutal combat with swords, axes, pikes and halberds—the sheer, personal butchery of edged steel cleaving flesh, close enough for an enemy's blood to spray into a man's face and eyes. He saw arrow storms, and thundering cavalry. He saw fountains of flame he somehow knew were born of the same sort of "sorcery" which had brought him to this world, this place. And he saw other flames—the flames of burning cities and villages, their streets littered with the bodies of those who had once lived in those blazing homes. He saw the bodies of women, mothers, cut down as they fled with children in their arms. He saw the children they'd tried to save. He saw laughing warriors tossing screaming children *into* the flames. He saw blood soaked altars, surrounded by the butchered bodies of sacrificial victims while still more victims were dragged, fighting frantically, to their fates. And he saw . . . *creatures* he had no names for—creatures out of the darkest depths of nightmare—killing and maiming, devouring. He saw them being *directed*, controlled, in their slaughter.

And he saw the men—and women—who stood against the tide of butchery and darkness. He watched them, recognized the iron determination and raw courage which kept them on their feet, facing that avalanche of horror when simple sanity must have cried out for them to flee for their lives. Some of them seemed wrapped in glittering coronas of blue light, like some sort of lightning. Others were simply men and women, with no light, no special aura. Only men and women who could not let the darkness triumph unopposed. Who *had* to face it.

And who died fighting it.

He saw it all, and only much later did he realize that what seemed to have taken hours at the time could not have lasted more than a very few minutes.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. The images disappeared, and he found himself staring into Wencit of Rûm's wildfire eyes.

"That's *my* war, Gunnery Sergeant Houghton," the wizard said very, very softly. "And it's the war my friend is riding straight into all by himself."

II

"I'm thinking as how something new 'is after being added to the pot," Bahzell Bahnakson said to his horse.

Except, of course, that the magnificent roan stallion under his saddle *wasn't* a horse. In point of fact, Walsharno, son of Mathygan and Yorthandro, was a Sothÿ ii courser, far larger than any mere "horse," and as intelligent as any of the Races of Man. And, like the fox-eared hradani in his saddle, a champion of the war god, Tomanâk.

"And to just what sudden stroke of genius *do we owe that particular observation?*" >a mellow voice asked deep inside Bahzell's brain.

"The fact that we're after seeing another entire batch of hoof prints joining up with them," he replied, waving one hand at the trail of trampled grass leading steadily southeast from the slight rise upon which they had halted. A second trail had just joined it, angling in from the west.

"Oh, that."

"Aye, that," Bahzell agreed sardonically.

"Well, maybe there'll be enough of them that they'll get in each other's way," Walsharno suggested.

"And if you're after believing that, I've some bottomland on the Ghoul Moor I could be letting you have cheap."

"I never said I thought it would *happen that way*. I merely pointed out that it could."

"Aye, so you did. And so far as wishful thinking is going, it's in my mind it's not so very much less likely than the King Emperor deciding as how he should be after adopting me as his heir."

Walsharno blew through his nostrils, shaking his head in equine amusement, and Bahzell chuckled. Not that either of them truly found the situation all that humorous. Champions of Tomanâk were seldom handed easy challenges, but this one was turning steadily more nasty as they went along, and Bahzell eased himself in the saddle as he contemplated how simple it had all seemed in the beginning.

It had started as little more than an unidentified raiding party, attacking herds and small villages along the southern frontier of the Kingdom of the Sothôii. Everyone's first assumption had been that the raiders who ruled the Kingdom of the River Brigands at the head of the Lake of Storms were responsible. But they had protested their innocence, and—in this case—they'd actually been telling the truth. Tomanâk was the god of justice, as well as the god of war, and no one could lie successfully when one of his champions directly invoked his power.

Had it in fact been the River Brigands, the situation would have been straightforward and relatively simple. The Brigands knew hradani only too well, and, like everyone else in northwestern Norfressa, they were sufficiently familiar with Bahzell's reputation to have listened very closely when he suggested that their current activities might be . . . unwise. Unfortunately, it hadn't been them after all, which had raised the interesting question of just who *was* responsible, and why.

Raiding the Sothôii was always a high-risk proposition, even when there wasn't a champion of Tomanâk handy. The Sothôii cavalry was the most deadly light horse force in Norfressa, and the wind riders—mounted on coursers like Walsharno—were the most terrifying *heavy* cavalry the world had ever seen. The raiders had shown uncanny skill in picking their moments and targets, then vanishing before even Sothôii cavalry could respond, but no one could keep that up forever. Sooner or later, they would be unlucky, and people who were unlucky against Sothôii cavalry were *very* unlucky, indeed.

Even leaving that aside, there was the question of exactly what the raiders were doing with their booty in the first place. If the River Brigands weren't involved, then who was paying them for their plunder, and where were they disposing of it? The vast, rolling expanse of Norfressa east of the Kingdom of the Sothôii and of the Empire of the Spear was still only imperfectly explored. The Spearmen's borders were advancing slowly but steadily eastward, but the hundreds of leagues of grassland and forest were still all but uninhabited. A few hardy bands of homesteaders had carved towns and villages, a scattering of independent baronies and vest-pocket kingdoms, out of the wilderness, but that was all, and none of them were likely to be able to pay for stolen goods. For that matter, the neighborhoods in which they lived more dangerous and enough already. None of them were likely to be stupid enough to make things still worse by arousing the Sothôii's ire by dealing with anyone who had attacked them.

But if the raiders weren't shipping their plunder south through the Brigand river ports of Krelik and Palan, and if they weren't selling it to one of those eastern settlements, then what *were* they doing with it?

"I'm not liking this one little bit," Bahzell said aloud, and Walsharno tossed his head again, and not in

amusement this time.

"There've been too many jabs like this over the last few years," the stallion agreed grimly. *"And there's the stink of the Dark about this."*

"Aye, that there is." Bahzell's tone was every bit as grim as his companion's. "I'm thinking himself wasn't after sending no fewer than four of his champions off to the Wind Plain for no reason at all."

"He didn't 'send' allof us," Walsharno pointed out. *"Some of us wereborn on the Wind Plain."*

"And so you were," Bahzell acknowledged. "Still and all, it's not so very happy in my own mind I am about how much interest the Dark is after showing in the Sothôii and my own folk. Come to that, himself's not so happy about it, either. And if the number of champions he's been after sending out this way is anything to be judging by, I've the nagging suspicion there's worse to come."

"It does seem the Dark Gods are especially exercised over the relationship your father's been working out with the Sothôii," Walsharno said. *"And my folk, too, for that matter."*

"And why might that be, d'you think?" Bahzell asked ironically.

"I'm sure I don't know. "

"And himself's not about to be telling us, either, is he now?"

This time, Walsharno simply snorted, and Bahzell chuckled harshly. For the most part, he both understood and agreed with Tomanâk's reasons for not simply leading his champions by the hand. Still, there were times a man might have appreciated at least a few hints about what the Dark Gods had in mind.

Part of it was easy enough to understand. Bahzell's father, Prince Bahnak of the Horse Stealer Hradani, who'd finally brought the warring northern clans together under a single crown and a single banner, was no friend of the Dark. Worse, he was working steadily with Baron Tellian and some of the other senior Sothôii nobles to bring an end to the thousand years of hostility, hatred, and open warfare between them and his own people. His cordial relationship with the city states of Dwarvenhame was something else the Dark Gods couldn't approve of, as his people became steadily richer, better educated, and prosperous.

The Dark didn't like any of that, for obvious reasons, which would have been fully sufficient to explain its constant interference with Bahnak's progress. Yet Bahzell was convinced there was more to it. The Dark's efforts had been too specifically targeted, and the Dark Gods themselves had interfered too openly, for him to believe otherwise. And, as Walsharno had just observed, there was the stink of the Dark about this, as well.

"Are you after thinking what I am?" he asked after a moment.

"Probably," Walsharno replied glumly. *"It does appear to be our area of specialization, after all. The question that occurs to me is whether or not the other side counted on that. I'm getting rather tired of enjoying so much of the Dark Gods' personal attention."*

Bahzell's laugh was full of gravel. He'd been developing a more and more specific feel for what they were pursuing, and that feel was growing increasingly familiar. As Walsharno said, both he and his companion appeared to have a special affinity for dealing with Sharnâ's followers and the demons who

served them. There were, he conceded, safer "specializations" a man might have taken up.

"At least it's a job we've managed to be doing so far," he pointed out.

"*And it's also the sort of job you only get to fail at once,*" Walsharno countered as if he'd read Bahzell's previous thought. Which he probably had, after all.

"Here now! That's no way for a champion of Tomanâk to be thinking! It's the challenge of it you should be pondering on."

"Oh, I am. *I am! Can't you tell?*"

Bahzell chuckled again. Then Walsharno started forward once more, following the tracks which had led them so far, and Bahzell glanced up at the sky. Another couple of hours, he thought. They'd have to be thinking about making camp, soon, but they could cover a few more miles before sunset. It wasn't as if they hadn't already covered quite a few of them. In fact, they were well into the Empire of the Spear, less than a week or so from Alfroma, even for a horse, much less a courser, and his expression softened slightly at the thought. Zarantha of Jashan's mage academy was located at Sherhan, just outside Alfroma. He'd been contemplating a visit to her for some time, although he hadn't had anything quite like this in mind. Still, it would be good to see her again . . . always assuming, of course, that he and Walsharno survived this little journey.

III

Trayn Aldarfro's eyes opened once more. This time, they actually stayed that way for more than a minute or two.

Not that it was any particular improvement.

Trayn lay belly-down across a horse's bony spine, tied firmly into place like a pack saddle. His head wound had finally stopped bleeding, although his hair was heavily caked with the blood he'd lost before it did. The broken ribs on his left side—at least two or three of them, he thought—sent grating stabs of anguish through him each time one of the horse's hooves came down, and a pair of well-muscled dwarves hammered steadily away at the anvil behind his forehead. Still, taking everything which had happened into consideration, it was astonishing that he was as close to intact as he appeared to be. Which, unfortunately, wasn't the same thing as being lucky to be alive.

He closed his eyes once more while dagger-sharp white flashes jounced through his brain. The pain was more than sufficient to disrupt his concentration, but he doubted he was close enough to the Academy for him to have reached it, anyway. He had only a minor gift for telepathy, and he was badly range-limited at the best of times, which these definitely weren't. For that matter, he'd been close to the edge of his range when he and his companions had been attacked, and that had obviously been hours ago.

For that matter, he told himself grimly, *it might very well have been days ago, the way I feel.*

He tried to at least extend his senses far enough to tell how many of the others had also been taken prisoner, but the unpredictable, jagged bolts of pain made even that impossible. At least, he hoped it was because of the pain; he didn't want to consider the other reasons he might not have been able to sense the presence of any of his friends.

He tugged surreptitiously at his bonds, and discovered—as he'd been certain would prove the

case—that escape was impossible. Which left him free to concentrate on all the unpleasant possible explanations for why he found himself in his present predicament.

I should've paid more attention to Mistress Zarantha's warnings, he thought bitterly. *It just seemed so ridiculous. After all, who could be stupid enough to actually attack a mage academy? Especially one under the protection of Duke Jashan himself?*

He still didn't know the answers to those questions, but he felt sinkingly certain he was going to find out. He didn't expect to like those answers very much, either.

He felt his consciousness start to waver once again. In some ways, he would have been glad to pass back out, but that was cowardice speaking, and he set his teeth, calling upon the disciplines in which he'd been trained to push the blackness back. The lightheadedness eased after a moment, and he turned the same discipline to the task of overcoming the savage pain bursts of his headache.

The first attacks in the academy's vicinity had seemed little more than coincidental. Zarantha of Jashan was the eldest daughter of the Duke of Jashan, and her father had helped her academy recruit a solid core of armsmen under the command of Colonel Tothas, Mistress Zarantha's personal armsman since childhood. More to the point, perhaps, a third or more of the senior magi Zarantha had attracted as instructors were trained *mishuki*, among the most deadly practitioners of weaponless combat in all of Norfressa. For that matter, many of the magi possessed combat-grade gifts which even black sorcery would find difficult to overcome.

In the face of those considerations, it had seemed obvious that not even the hardest raider would have deliberately set out to attack the academy. For that matter, it was unlikely the attackers had been working to *any* sort of deliberate plan. There was always some brigandage in the Empire of the Spear, especially in its southern provinces, where the Empire shared a common border with the Purple Lords. The Wild Wash Hradani on the Purple Lords' western border periodically raided into the Empire, as well, and it was common knowledge (although seldom spoken of) that the half-elven Purple Lords themselves had a policy of subsidizing attacks on the fiefs of Spearman nobles who appeared to be growing too powerful. The Duke of Jashan obviously fell into that category, as far as the Purple Lords were concerned, so no one had been particularly surprised when a village or two in his dukedom, the closest of them several days' travel south of the academy, had been attacked.

Duke Jashan's armsmen had responded quickly, but the attackers had vanished like smoke, leaving only charred ruins, bodies, and missing people in their wake. Unfortunately, they'd also left very little in the way of clues which might have identified them. Nor had anyone been able to come up with a convincing theory for their motives. There hadn't been that much worth stealing in the villages, and no one had gone raiding in the Empire for slaves since the last Shith Kiri Corsair attacks, fifty years ago. Besides, as far as anyone could tell, the captives who'd been taken had mostly been children, scarcely the sort of prisoners in which slavers would have been interested.

But the attacks had continued, sporadically, spaced out over a period of weeks, even months. Duke Jashan had established nodal forces, placed to cover the towns and villages for whose defense he was responsible, but the raiders had avoided them with what appeared to be ludicrous ease. Tothas had extended his own patrols to protect the area immediately around the academy, but still the attacks had gotten through. No defense could be strong everywhere, and if the Duke and Tothas were prepared to protect the villages, then the attackers hit individual farms and freeholds. The attacks had been infrequent, the intervals between them unpredictable and often lengthy. At times, it had been tempting to believe they'd stopped completely, but they always resumed. Recently, a few clues had begun coalescing which suggested the Purple Lords were, indeed, behind it all, but there'd been nothing definite. Which explained

why Trayn had been sent out with one of Tothas' patrols. Although he was still only a journeyman, far from a master mage in proficiency or strength, he had a powerful gift for object reading. If they could get him to the site of an attack quickly enough for him to examine the aura the attackers had left behind, he might well be able to positively identify them. Failing that, he might at least have been able to determine where they were staging their attacks from.

It had all seemed completely straightforward to Trayn when it was explained to him. Only Mistress Zarantha had seemed particularly concerned. Which, given the fact that one of her minor gifts was precognition, should have been a sufficiently strong suggestion that he ought to be doing more worrying of his own, he acknowledged now.

"I know there's no concrete evidence to support the theory," the academy's dark-haired, diminutive mistress had said, "but I'm still convinced that whoever is doing this is a direct threat to the Academy, as well. They may have been careful about staying safely outside our own grounds, but look at the pattern. They've hit villages and individual farms all around us, even when they must have known the targets they'd chosen risked interception by Father's armsmen, as well as our own. I doubt very much that they'd hesitate for a moment about snapping up any mage they come across."

"I understand, Mistress," Trayn had replied. "And I promise we'll be careful."

He'd meant every word of it, too, but he'd also felt completely confident of his own security. Twenty-five trained, experienced armsmen, all armed with horse bows as well as light lances, would be more than sufficient to deal with the sort of outlaw rabble capable of carrying out such attacks.

Except that whoever these people were, they certainly *weren't* anything as simple as "outlaw rabble."

The ambush had been very carefully arranged, but even so, armsmen trained by Tothas should have been able to cut their way clear of it. They would have, too, without the sudden, unnatural fog which had blinded them at precisely the wrong moment. And without the hideous bolts of poison-green lightning which had come flashing through the fog to kill Darnoth, the patrol's commander, and both of his senior sergeants without so much as a chance to scream.

Even while the fog had blinded Trayn and his companions, their attackers had moved and fought as if the morning remained daylight clear. Darnoth's armsmen hadn't stood a chance in the face of such a devastating disadvantage. Trayn had heard them fighting back desperately all about him, invisible through the sight-devouring grayness, and there'd been nothing at all he could do to help them. Despite his gifts, despite his own training as *amishuk*, he'd been able to see *nothing*. He hadn't even sensed the blow which struck him out of his own saddle until a fraction of an instant before it landed.

And now, he couldn't even estimate how long ago it had happened.

Despair threatened his concentration, but he thrust it firmly aside. That much, at least, his training was equal to, and his efforts to suppress the pain slowly yielded at least partial success as the dwarves beating on the anvil in the center of his skull finally decided to put their hammers down. It didn't do very much about the pain of his broken ribs, or his bruises, or the gnawing bite of his bonds, or the horse jouncing him about, but at least he was able to summon at least some of his own gifts, and he reached out cautiously, feeling for the auras of any of Darnoth's men.

He sensed exactly nothing, and grief stabbed through him.

His eyes burned, but even as they did, a terrifying question burned through his grief. If none of the

armsmen had been worth taking alive, why had *he*? What was so special about *him* that their ambushers had kept him alive?

He didn't know . . . yet.

But he was grimly certain that he was going to find out.

IV

"Boss, are you *sure* this is a good idea?"

Houghton's lips quirked as Mashita's plaintive voice came over the commo link. The youthful PFC was driving with his head poked up through his hatch. He'd have to drop down inside the vehicle and button up if—or when—they ran into the trouble they all anticipated, but he had a much better field of vision this way than he would have from inside. Houghton could see only the back of Mashita's helmet when he looked down from his own position, but he didn't have to see the driver's face to know exactly what his expression looked like. Jack Mashita had been born and raised in Montana, and, despite his ancestry, it didn't appear that he'd ever heard about "inscrutable Orientals."

"Of course I'm not," the gunnery sergeant replied as Tough Mama snorted across the prairie. "But you heard Wencit. He says he can't send us back until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest." He shrugged, standing in the gunner's hatch now, rather than the commander's, while he gazed out into the steadily gathering gloom. "You have any better ideas on how to spend the time?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah," Mashita said. "Personally, I thought your idea about camping right there until he got around to it sounded just peachy."

"Yeah, sure you did." Houghton snorted.

Mashita started to reply, then stopped, and the gunnery sergeant grimaced. Jack had seen Wencit's magically conjured images, too, and Houghton was pretty sure it was the kids which had made up the driver's mind.

Mashita was barely more than half Houghton's own age. Sometimes, the gulf seemed much broader than that . . . especially from Houghton's side. Jack projected a sort of world-weary cynicism which, Houghton suspected, the youngster thought made him look older and more experienced.. He also made a point of always anticipating the worst; that way, he'd once explained, any surprises had to be pleasant ones. And he always asserted—vigorously—that the only time he'd ever volunteered for anything in his life had been the day a Marine recruiter had taken advantage of a hung-over young high school graduate . . . which, as Houghton knew from personal experience, was a crock. But underneath that armor, there was someone who truly believed it was the job of people like the United States Marine Corps to make a difference in the world. Someone who'd seen more ugliness and violence than any dozen civilians his own age, and who'd been decorated not once, but twice, for dragging wounded civilians to safety in the middle of a firefight. Someone who'd spent hours of his off-duty time assisting the "hearts and minds" medical teams, and who helped coach a Marine-sponsored basketball team when he wasn't out with the docs.

Someone who'd seen the deliberate butchery of children in Wencit's moving images.

That was all it really would have taken to get Jack Mashita to sign on for the mission, and Houghton knew it. But he also knew that if *he* hadn't agreed, Mashita wouldn't have either, kids or no kids. And if

Kenneth Houghton understood exactly why Mashita had volunteered, he was less certain about his own motives.

Partly, he knew, it was the fact that Wencit had a schedule of his own to keep. Preposterous as everything which had already happened seemed, it was obvious that there were really only two possibilities. One, Tough Mama had driven over an IDE, and one Kenneth Houghton was floating through the weirdest drug dream he'd ever heard of while the docs worked on him. Two, he really, truly was in an entirely different universe, and a white-haired wizard with FX eyes really was the only person who could ever get him home again.

Personally, in a lot of ways, he would have preferred the first possibility, but he doubted the answer could be that simple. In either case, he might as well proceed as if it was really happening, and Wencit was obviously far too concerned over his friend—this "Bahzell" character—to sit around a campfire toasting marshmallows (or whatever the hell they used instead around here) while he waited for the "ripples" to settle so he could send them home again. Short of holding a gun on the wizard, Houghton couldn't think of any way *to make* Wencit stay put. And the more he saw of the old fellow, and the deeper the acceptance of magic—in this universe, at least—sank into him, the more he found himself doubting Wencit would have allowed him to do anything of the sort.

The old bugger can "summon" a fourteen-ton LAV out of an entirely different universe, he reflected. *So just what makes you think he'll let you sit there with a dinky little .45 pointed at him, Ken?*

He couldn't think of a single answer to that question, and since Wencit was obviously going to go haring off into the night in an effort to rescue this Bahzell all by himself, the only logical thing for Houghton and Mashita to do was to tag along. After all, they could hardly afford to let him get himself killed before he sent them home.

Actually, Houghton rather liked that analysis of their situation. It was logical, pragmatic, with a strong dollop of tough-minded self-interest.

It was also, like Jack's insistence that he'd never volunteered for anything, a crock.

Gunnery Sergeant Houghton was uncomfortable with that realization, but there was no point pretending it wasn't true. Wencit's images had gotten to him, too, and the old wizard was right. There *were* responsibilities any man had to accept, regardless of the universe in which he found himself, if he ever wanted to face his mirror again.

Yet even that fell short of the full answer, and he felt his mind going back, wandering into memories he'd spent two years sealing away behind an impenetrable barrier. Back to the days when he'd been a husband who'd expected to become a father soon.

Gwynn always understood, he thought. *She knew what made me tick, what I had to believe to beme. And she believed it with me—believed it for me, deeply enough to keep me sane.*

Where had he lost that certainty, he wondered? Had it died in the same Ford Explorer as Gwynn? Been crushed with her and their unborn son on an icy mountain road by a pulpwood truck with a blown tire? Or had he lost it later, when he no longer had her to talk to, to confess to, to share the pain with. A tough-as-nails gunnery sergeant wasn't supposed to need to do those things. Which was stupid, of course. Gunnery sergeants were human beings, too, whatever the unwritten rule book required them to pretend. But Gwynn had always known better than that, always been there for him, always *made* him share the dark things with her, as well as the bright.

She'd been his moral compass, he realized. Not the only one he'd had . . . just the most important of them all. He'd survived without her, relied upon all those other compasses, but it hadn't been the same. Not as he'd confronted a world in which human beings turned themselves and even their own children into living bombs in the twisted name of God. One in which the enemy murdered captives in front of cameras and broadcast the images over the Internet and snipers routinely opened fire on religious processions while bombers deliberately targeted mosques and synagogues. One in which the people fighting those murderous fanatics altogether too often inflicted horrific "collateral damage?" of their own and even some of the good guys—even some of Houghton's fellow Marines—found themselves infected with the same soul-deep sickness and committed acts every bit as brutal as any of the "enemy's." It had all hammered down on his own sense of loss, his own grief, and he'd lost his certitude. What had once been clear-cut and unambiguous had become something else, and he'd feared that *th*ewas becoming something else, as well. Something . . . tainted, which Gwynn would not have recognized.

That's really what it is, isn't it?he reflected.*It's that simple.However you got here,wherever you are, it's that simple.Wencit's offered to give you back that certainty,at least for a while.You're free to choose between good and evil,between those who preserve and those who destroy, in a universe that isn't even yours.One where you canknowyou chose .*

One where you can be the man Gwynn loved again.

"How much further?" Houghton asked an hour or so later.

He turned his head to look at the man standing next to him in the right-hand hatch. The Montana-born and bred Mashita had almost literally stood there drooling when he finally got a good look at Wencit's horse. The wizard had explained that it was something called a "Sothôii warhorse," yet magnificent as it obviously was, it wouldn't have been able to match the LAV's speed and, especially, endurance. Houghton had been uncertain what to do about that, but Wencit had simply spoken calmly into the saddled horse's ear for a moment, then pointed in a northerly direction. The horse had responded by lipping the wizard's hair with obvious affection, then trotted cheerfully off in the indicated direction. Somehow, Houghton was certain Wencit and the stallion wouldn't have any trouble finding one another again later.

Since the wizard was now a passenger (and totally untrained in any of the vehicle crew's duties), Houghton had put him at the commander's station so that he himself could take over the gunner's duties if it proved necessary. Technically, the vehicle commander was supposed to ride standing in his hatch on the right side of the turret at "name tape defilade," with just his head and shoulders clear of the vehicle. The gunner, on the other hand, was supposed to ride in his seat, inside the turret, watching through his optical and thermal sights. The vehicle commander could do some of the gunner's job for him—the hand station joystick at the CO's position allowed him to control turret traverse and fire the twenty-five-millimeter cannon and coaxial machine gun—but that was really the gunner's responsibility. He was also the crewmember specifically located and assigned to deal with any misfires, feed jams, or other problems with the armament. Given the fact that Wencit didn't have a clue how Tough Mama's weapons—or sights—worked, Houghton had decided he had no choice other than to take the gunner's station for himself, but he was still the vehicle commander, as well.

Wencit had been parked in the seat which was normally Houghton's, adjusted to let him sit as comfortably as possible in the cramped, flat-topped turret. Fortunately, Diego Santander had left his helmet aboard, which did two useful things. First, it let Wencit tie into the LAV's commo net. Secondly, it

protected his skull from all of the many objects waiting to come into painful contact with it as Tough Mama bounced and swayed unpredictably across the grasslands.

Houghton wondered how much time Wencit had spent admiring the bevy of unclad and semi-clad young ladies whose pinups adorned the overhead, but he understood why the wizard had decided to stand back up, despite the outstanding attractions of the art gallery.

Long marches standing upright in the hatch might be both exhausting and painful, and it wasn't at all unheard-of for an LAV to roll. When that happened, a man had to be able to drop quickly down into the turret if he didn't want to get squashed like a bug, which made adjusting his seat so that he could sit looking out . . . unwise. The driver, on the other hand, should be protected in a rollover, since the turret ought to hold the vehicle hull off the ground. That was why Wencit's seat was adjusted to let him sit with his head safely inside. But the wizard was just as tall as Houghton was, and the LAV had clearly been designed for people Mashita's size. Claustrophobia would have been bad enough, even without all of the interesting protrusions eager to leave their mark upon Tough Mama's passengers, but no doubt Wencit *needed* to stretch some of that length out.

"It's hard to say how much further," Wencit replied now, in answer to his question. "I still can't get a clear look through their glamour."

"Sounds like a lot of so-called 'intel' I've gotten handed over the years," Houghton snorted.

"I did tell you there were going to be problems," Wencit pointed out mildly, and Houghton surprised himself with a chuckle.

"Yeah, you did," he agreed, almost as if all of this made some sort of coherent sense after all.

Darkness had finished falling a good two hours ago. Mashita was steering by the aid of his night-vision gear, and Houghton had his own goggles down. Although NVG wasn't as big an advantage as it once had been back home, since the other side had started acquiring the same sort of technology, the Corps had managed, by and large, to stay ahead of the curve. Here, though, no one had ever even heard of electronics, he thought, watching the gray-green universe moving steadily past as Tough Mama's wheels churned through the tall grass.

Of course, he thought sardonically, *some people seem to be able to see just a little bit better than others.*

"Tell me, Wencit," he said, "have you always been particularly fond of carrots?"

"What?" The bright spots of the wizard's peculiar eyes vanished for an instant as he blinked in obvious perplexity, and Houghton grinned. It was the first time he'd managed to throw the other man completely off balance with a simple question.

Then the brightness of Wencit's eyes reappeared, and Houghton's grin faded. His question might have gone right by the wizard, but it was obvious to him that Wencit, without any artificial aids at all, could see in the dark at least as well as he could.

And why shouldn't he? Nothing *else that's happened so far makes any sense, does it?*

"Never mind." He shook his head. "I know you said something about 'glamours' and 'scrying spells.' I even understand that glamours are like . . . camouflage, or maybe what we might call stealth back home.

And that scrying spells are the way you wizards get around the glamours. But I'm a simple jarhead from someplace where no one ever heard of magic that really works. I don't have a clue what you're talking about when you wander off into those detailed explanations of yours. So could you try and put it into very, very simple terms even I can understand? If you can get through their defenses well enough to know which *direction* to go, how can you not know how *far* to go?"

"The problem is that it's not just any old wizard on the other end of that glamour," Wencit replied after a moment. He turned to look ahead, and the diamond-bright pin pricks of his glowing eyes disappeared from Houghton's gray-green world.

"Glamours and scrying spells are like a . . . wrestling match, in a lot of ways." He chuckled sourly. "You did say you wanted a simple analogy, and that's about as basic as it gets. Each wizard has a certain inherent strength, and each wizard knows a certain number of 'holds' to use against the other in something like this. Depending on how the match goes, you can tear certain bits and pieces of information away from the other fellow, but you can't always predict exactly which ones you'll get. And the better matched the 'wrestlers' are, the less predictable the outcome becomes."

He glanced back at Houghton, who nodded to show that he was still with him . . . so far, at least.

"Well," Wencit continued, "as I already told you, I'm what people call a 'wild wizard.' That means I'm capable of much more powerful spells than most wizards can produce. And I've also been around a long, long time, so I've learned a great many 'holds' over the years. But there are limits in all things, Ken Houghton. And, unfortunately, there are some very powerful and well-trained 'wand wizards,' as well. Worse, wild wizards can't combine their sorcery with anyone else's, but wand wizards can. And it happens that there are at least three of those powerful wand wizards out there in front of us, two of whom are combining their efforts to maintain their glamour. They're very good, too. In fact, unless I'm very much mistaken, they aren't Norfressan at all."

"What's 'Norfressan,' and why should it matter one way or the other?" Houghton asked.

"Norfressa is the continent we're currently driving across," Wencit said dryly. "Most of the people on it are descended from refugees who fled to it about twelve hundred years ago from another continent, called Kontovar."

He paused, and Houghton grimaced.

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like finding out what caused them all to decide to . . . relocate so abruptly?"

"Because of the fact that I called them 'refugees', perhaps?"

"That was probably it," Houghton agreed.

"Well, it was certainly the appropriate word," Wencit continued rather more grimly. "The short version of what happened is that there was a rebellion—possibly it would be more accurate to call it a civil war—which led to the fall of the Empire of Ottovar, the most powerful empire this world has ever known. The war began as a revolt against the authority of the Strictures of Ottovar, the fundamental law Ottovar and his wife Gwynytha had laid down to govern the use and misuse of sorcery at the time they created the empire. The rebels won."

For just a moment, Wencit's voice was like a shard of rusty ice, hammered flat and cold.

"The Council of Ottovar, the council of wizards charged with enforcing the Strictures, was destroyed along with the Empire. I was a member of that council. In fact, I was its last head. I know you've seen horrible things in the wars you've fought, but I very much doubt that you've ever seen the equal of the horrors the Council of Carnadosa, the black wizards, loosed upon the world in their arrogance and mad ambition. The demons they set free, the way they *twisted* and perverted their slaves and victims. The way they played with the Races of Man like vicious children with toys.

"I'm willing to believe that at least some of them didn't deliberately set out to give themselves to the pure service of evil. There's a hunger in any wizard. The art is like a fever, one that calls out to you. A wizard can't refuse that call, and for some of us any limitation, any restriction that prevents us from pursuing the full and free exercise of our art, is all but intolerable. Which was precisely the reason Ottovar and Gwynytha created the Strictures in the first place, to protect those who couldn't command sorcery from those who could. But once the Strictures were broken or rejected, the lure of unbridled power did what it always does. It drew them further and further from the Light, and as they sank deeper into the Dark, they embraced it like lovers."

He paused and drew a deep breath.

"We saved what we could. It wasn't a lot. And after we'd gotten out everyone we could, the last surviving members of the Council of Ottovar strafed Kontovar. We rained down death and destruction across an entire continent. We burned cities and entire realms, Gunnery Sergeant, killed every living creature for thousands of leagues in all directions from Trÿ fry lantha, the ancient capital of Ottovar.

"We couldn't kill everything, of course, and the most powerful of their wizards were protected behind their own shields, their own wards. But we killed their lesser allies . . . and their armies, their slaves, their sorcerous creations. We killed the victims they would have used as their tools to conquer all of Norfressa, as well. It was the only thing we could do, the only way to prevent them from following us here, to Norfressa, to complete their victory, and the price of that devastation was high. The spells we created and invoked—the spells *crafted*—cost the lives of almost every other member of the Council, but they worked. Oh, yes, they *worked*."

"Christ," Houghton muttered. He might not understand much about the bizarre universe in which he found himself, but however little he knew of this "Norfressa," he understood more than enough about men to grasp the bleeding anguish in the depths of Wencit's level, unflinching voice. These people might never have heard of nuclear weapons, but it didn't sound like they *needed* them, either. And, preposterous as it might be on the surface, he discovered that he didn't doubt for a moment that the man telling him the tale had seen the events he was describing with his own eyes—that he was over twelve hundred years old.

"You did enough damage to keep them out of—Norfressa?—for over a thousand years?" he asked.

"Yes and no." Wencit's shoulders twitched. "It took them several hundred years to begin recovering to anything like their previous strength, that's true. And by the time they did, the Norfressan realms—especially the Empire of the Axe—had grown strong enough to deter any thought of an invasion over such an enormous distance. Or, at least, any thought of an invasion not supported by the full power of their sorcery."

"So since they don't seem to have invaded and conquered you in the meantime, I assume there's some reason they *can't* use sorcery against you?"

"I still control the spells that strafed Kontovar," Wencit said coldly. "Once opened and activated, they

remain ready to my hand for as long as I live, and I remain the most powerful single wizard in the world. They know that if they were to attempt an outright invasion, I would use those spells again, if it was the only way to stop them."

Houghton swallowed hard at the iron-harsh certitude in Wencit's voice.

"But they also know I won't do so lightly," Wencit continued after a moment, his voice much closer to normal. "Whatever the ambitions of the Kontovaran lords, whatever crimes they might be prepared to commit, most of their slaves have no voice in their decisions or their actions. My fellows and I slew millions of those slaves once, because we had no choice, no other option, but in doing so, we dipped too near to the very thing we were fighting. The Strictures our enemies had violated prohibit the use of the art against non-wizards, or even against other *wizards*, except in direct self-defense or the defense of others, yet we killed more innocents in that single afternoon than any conqueror or tyrant in history. I . . . don't want so many deaths upon my soul again. If there were no other way to keep the perversions of the art, the horrors the Carnadosans—the wizards who have given themselves to the service of Carnadosa, the patroness of black sorcery—practice even today, from the shores of Norfressa, I would not hesitate. But neither would I unleash such devastation *unless* there were no other way."

"Sort of like the old Cold War back home," Houghton mused. Wencit turned his head again, cocking it questioningly, and it was Houghton's turn to shrug. "For about fifty or sixty years, there were two major power blocs in my world. Each of them had weapons with the capacity to completely destroy the other—hell, to kill every single person in the world, for that matter! And because the leaders on both sides knew it, there was a standoff between them. The major nations on either side didn't dare to fight one another directly, for fear it would lead to the use of those weapons."

"That might, indeed, be an appropriate parallel," Wencit agreed. "Especially since I noticed that you said they dared not 'fight one another *directly*.'"

"I see where this is going," Houghton said unhappily. "What you're telling me is that somewhere up ahead of us are two or three of those 'Carnadosans' or 'Kontovarans' of yours. They aren't ready, or willing, at least, to go for some sort of decisive, open attack, but they're perfectly willing to nibble away at the edges, right?"

"Precisely." Wencit exhaled heavily. "Very few Norfressans are aware of it, but there's a constant, ongoing fight in the shadows. Most people don't *want* to know about it, really. They don't think about Kontovar at all, unless they have to. And whenever the fighting spills out of the shadows, they tend to think of it as something that's purely Norfressan, not something afflicting us from outside. They don't realize how continually Kontovar keeps probing at our defenses, keeps seeking ways to weaken us, or allies they can recruit to distract us, or to attack us from within. Their rulers are very careful to avoid anything so open, so clearcut—so immediately threatening—that I might loose the spells once more. But for almost a thousand years, I've been dealing with efforts to 'nibble away at the edges,' as you put it."

"Which is what's going on here," Houghton said.

"Yes. The one good thing about the Kontovarans is that their factions don't get along a great deal better than the Dark Gods themselves do. They hate us much more than they hate each other, but they're constantly jockeying for positions of advantage in their purely internal struggles, which means mutual suspicion and distrust often hamper their efforts. Unfortunately, sometimes their deities manage to pound a little cooperation into them."

"Wait," Houghton said. "Wait one minute. You mean there are gods—*real gods*—involved in this?"

"Of course there are." Wencit sounded puzzled. "That's not the case in your universe?"

"People in my universe have been killing each other in the name of God for thousands of years, Wencit," Houghton said slowly, "but He doesn't appear in person to approve their efforts. You asked about the war Jack and I are fighting back home? Well, a lot of it stems from a bunch of lunatics who're convinced that *they* know what God wants, and that anyone who disagrees with them is too vile to live. But their beliefs are based on their interpretation of scripture and teachings, not on the direct, recent revelation of God in any sort of personal appearance. In fact, a lot of people where I come from, no longer believe God even exists."

"I find that . . . difficult to envision," Wencit said slowly. "Oh, I've always known the forces of Light and Dark manifest differently in other universes. And, for that matter, that they don't intervene directly at all in some of them. But a universe in which people don't even believe *they exist*? Don't see their own responsibility to choose between them?"

"It's not quite that bad," Houghton replied a bit uncomfortably, almost defensively. "Even a lot of people who don't believe in any sort of gods believe in the difference between good and evil and human beings' responsibility to choose between them. It's just . . . different from what you're describing."

"It must be, indeed," Wencit agreed. Then he shook himself. "But, yes, in answer to your question, the gods do indeed involve themselves in our struggles. They can't confront one another directly, because—like your "cold war" nations—they're too powerful. A direct clash between them would very probably destroy this universe completely, so they act through their followers. Through their worshipers, and in the case of the Gods of Light, especially, through their champions. Like Bahzell."

"Your buddy—the guy who's riding into the trap?"

"Yes. In fact, unless I'm very much mistaken, the primary motive for this entire endeavor is to destroy him and Walsharno. Mind you, I'm sure they have other objectives, as well, but they've been trying for years now to kill Bahzell."

"Why him in particular? And if they're so hot to kill him, what about *you*?"

"There are a great many reasons for them to want Bahzell dead. Most of them would be happy enough to kill him for simple revenge's sake, given how much damage he's done to their plans in the past. But they—or, at least, their masters—also know things about his future threat to their ultimate objectives. Things Bahzell himself, I'm sure, doesn't even suspect at this point. In fact, I'm fairly certain they'd like to see him dead almost as much as they'd like to see *me* that way. And, yes, they do make periodic attempts to kill me, too. On the whole, however," Houghton could literally hear the predatory smile in Wencit's voice, "they've discovered that such attempts are a losing proposition."

Houghton nodded slowly, thoughtfully. He was certain there was a great deal Wencit wasn't telling him. Or, perhaps, it would be fairer to say that there were a great many things Wencit had already told him which he simply lacked the background to understand. But one thing, at least, was crystal clear.

He's really serious about the direct intervention of gods. *The good guys and the bad guys, and the differences between them, really are that clear cut. That. . . positive.*

They'd been a time, before Gwynn's death, when it had been that clear for Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Houghton. Not simple, or simplistic, but *clear*. When he'd known which was the side of Light, as Wencit

put it, and which the side of Dark, and which side he stood upon. When he'd been able to give himself to the pure service of the things he believed in . . . and been able to believe he himself was still worthy of his convictions.

Where did it go? It wasn't just Gwynn.*It wasn't just her that kept me knowing who I was, and why. But losing her, especially that way, so . . . meaninglessly . . .*

He remembered how furious he'd been with the universe, with God Himself, for taking away his Gwynn. His life. And as he tasted once again the cold, drawn ashes of that anger, he recognized the truth at last.

It wasn't the meaninglessness of Gwynn's death which had destroyed his certitude. It was his anger. He'd been so *angry* that he'd turned away from the things in which both he and Gwynn had believed. If God was going to take her from him, then he would strike back in the only way he could. He would turn away from the Light, like some petulant child, never realizing—or caring—that in the process he hurt himself so much more than he ever hurt the Light he blamed for failing Gwynn.

No, he thought bleakly. *Not for failing Gwynn; for failing me by taking her away. For leaving me to deal with the pain of the hole her death tore right through me.*

For the first time in two and a half years, he faced the truth of the decision he'd made. He'd never turned to the Dark, however much he'd turned *away* from the Light, but he'd exiled himself to the cold, gray wasteland between them. He'd convinced himself that the difference between them was one of degree, not of kind, and he'd clasped the cold bitterness of a struggle against shadows to him. He'd been one of those shadows himself, no longer fighting evil out of conviction, but only out of habit. Only out of momentum, and a dull burn of shame went through him as he finally recognized the choice he'd made. He hadn't even realized at the time that he was *making* a choice, but he should have.

Just as he should have realized how ashamed of him Gwynn would have been.

"Well, Wencit," he heard himself saying now, in a voice he scarcely recognized, "if these Dark Gods of yours are so eager to knock off your friend Bahzell, what say we go argue the point with them?"

V

"I hate this whole thing," a voice grated.

The language was Kontovaran. Not the pure Kontovaran still spoken by Norfressan scholars, nor the dialect which had evolved among the Sothôii since the Fall, but a harsh-edged, debased version of the ancient tongue of Ottovar. Trayn Aldarfro wasn't familiar with it, but he had sufficient of the telepathic gift to understand what was being said, anyway.

Now he kept his eyes closed, lying as still (and apparently unconscious) as he could where he'd been dumped when they halted, and listened carefully.

"And did anyone *ask* for your approval, Garsalt?" another voice half-sneered.

"Not any more than they did for *yours*, Rethak," the first voice shot back. "And don't tell me you don't have . . . qualms of your own." Garsalt made a spitting sound. "Just finding myself on the same continent as that old bastard makes *me* nervous."

"I notice it didn't make you nervous enough to tell Her you weren't going." Rethak's tone was mocking,

but Trayn could sample at least a little of the emotions behind it. Enough, at any rate, to know that Rethak was using ridicule to mask his own profound anxiety.

"I may be nervous; I'm not actively suicidal," Garsalt grunted.

"I didn't think so," Rethak said more mildly. "But if you had been, there's always Varnaythus' example, isn't there?"

"That's one name I wish you hadn't brought up," Garsalt muttered, and Trayn allowed his eyes to slit open slightly.

It didn't look as if his captors intended to tarry here for long. They'd stopped in the ravine a streambed had cut across the grasslands, apparently to rest their mounts, more than anything else. Several of the thirty or so armsmen were leading horses down to the stream in groups to water them, while others were digging into bags of grain and sweet feed. A line of small trees grew along the course of the stream, as well, and two or three other armsmen were gathering wood for the three fires which had been kindled. Kettles of water were already being heated over one of them, and Trayn's nostrils tried to twitch as he caught the savory scent of cooking stew coming from another, but no one was stowing any gear.

No, despite the smell of cookery, this was only another rest stop, and he wondered again why they were in such a tearing hurry. Limited as his telepathic range might be, it was enough for him to be certain no pursuit was close upon their heels. And what had happened to the men of Darnoth's patrol had already told him he was in the power of wizards, who certainly ought to be at least as capable of sniffing out pursuers as any half-trained journeyman mage.

Or, for that matter, dealing with those pursuers with the same deadly efficiency which had slaughtered Darnoth and his men.

"I was never that fond of Varnaythus myself," Garsalt continued, "but he deserved better than that. 'Cooperating' with . . . others didn't work out so very well for him, either, in the end, did it?"

"No, but I don't think She blamed Varnaythus for what happened," Rethak said. "Unfortunately, he didn't precisely cover himself with glory, either. And the Spider and Krahana weren't about to admit it was *their* tools' fault."

"No, and She didn't *save* him when they put the blame on him, did She?"

"If he'd succeeded, She wouldn't have had to."

Trayn turned his head a fraction of an inch just in time to see the speaker—Rethak—shrug. The man was of medium height, dark-haired and dark-complexioned, clad in comfortable, practical riding clothes, rather than the cuirasses and chainmail of the armsmen Trayn had seen. Despite the stiff pace the hard-riding raiders had set themselves, Rethak still managed to look somehow sleek and well groomed. He had a strong, slightly hooked nose and a neatly-trimmed beard, and a blood-red ruby glittered in his left earlobe as it caught the firelight.

Another man, who must be Garsalt, sat on a saddle, glowering up at him. Garsalt was taller and broader, and he seemed older, with only a thin surviving fringe of fair hair around the edges of a bald, gleaming pate. He was dressed very much like Rethak, but he looked untidy, almost unkempt, beside the smaller man. He also looked much gloomier.

"No, She wouldn't have," Garsalt conceded now. "But, as you say, it wasn't his fault. And now She expects us to do what he couldn't?" He shook his head. "I don't like it. Not one bit."

"It's not quite that bad," Rethak said. "And you might want to reflect on the fact that so far everything's been going exactly to plan."

"Things have a tendency to go 'exactly to plan' against Wencit . . . right up to the last minute, don't they?" Garsalt countered. "And the Bloody Hand's almost worse!"

"That's about enough of that." The third voice was lighter, higher pitched, and far more musical than the other two. It also carried a crisp ring of authority.

Then the new speaker stepped into the range of Trayn's vision, and it was all he could do to keep his eyes from widening in surprise as he saw her.

She was taller than Rethak, although not so tall as Garsalt, and her hair was the color of a raven's wing. She was dressed in the richly embroidered riding habit of a Purple Lord noblewoman; jewels glittered in her immaculately coiffeured hair, on her hands, and about her throat; and she moved with the lethal, sultry grace of some silk-furred hunting cat. From the way Garsalt came quickly, almost fearfully, to his feet and Rethak turned to face her, it was obvious who was in charge.

"I've let the two of you complain and fret and carry on long enough," she said sternly, her beautiful face hard. "Some of that is probably healthy, but it's time you got down to business and stopped whining about how little you want to be here. Is that clear?"

Rethak and Garsalt glanced at one another without—quite—shuffling their feet like schoolboys, then nodded in unison.

"Yes, Tremala," Rethak said for both of them.

"Good!" Tremala half-glared at them for a moment, then shrugged and allowed her expression to relax.

"I'm just as aware as you are of the risks we're running," she said. "Unlike the two of you, however, I also know why it's so imperative that we arrange for something . . . permanent to happen to the Bloody Hand. Fortunately, you don't need to concern yourselves about that. What you do have to concentrate on is seeing to it that the something permanent She has in mind happens, not worrying about his reputation or what happened to Varnaythus, or even to Jerghar. Understand?"

"Of course we do," Garsalt replied. "And, to be honest, I'm more worried about Wencit than I am about Bahzell."

"Which is precisely why we're out here cooperating with the Scorpion instead of trying to do it all by ourselves," Tremala said.

"With all due respect," Rethak chimed in, "Sharnâ's worshipers haven't exactly covered themselves—or Him—with glory any of the *other* times they've gone up against the Bloody Hand."

"No, they haven't." Tremala's voice was cool, but she nodded. "On the other hand, things are a bit different this time, aren't they? And this time, we're not planning on attacking our enemies' strengths."

She held Garsalt and Rethak with her eyes for another moment, then smiled. The expression was cold

and hungry, almost shockingly out of place on that lovely countenance.

"We all know how much the Others resent and fear Her power—*our* power. It was us, Carnadosa's Council, and our power that brought down the Ottovarans a thousand years ago. It was our shields, our wards, which allowed any of us to survive when Wencit strafed Kontovar. And it's our power—and our will—that truly dominates in Kontovar today. Are you surprised the Others resent Her, or that their worshipers resent *us*?"

The others shook their heads silently, and she shrugged.

"But just as the Others know they need Her, *we* need *them* if we're ever going to succeed. One of the reasons Wencit and Bahzell and Tomanâk's other 'champions' have done so well against us is that *they* cooperate with one another, and we don't. Which means that even when the Others agree to cooperate with Her, Their followers act as individual forces, not cooperating or combining their abilities."

"Yes, but —" Rethak began.

"Forget about 'but,'" she interrupted, her voice hard. "Of course all of Them are looking for ways to use Her—and us—for Their benefit. Let them. When it comes down to it, whose followers truly have the strength to rule in this world?"

Her chuckle was not a pleasant sound.

"So don't worry about what happens *after*," she said. "Worry about what happens now, tonight. And think about this. The Bloody Hand and his little pony have done well enough against *singled* demons, but this time, we'll see how he does when they bring friends along. Somehow, I don't think he's going to enjoy the experience."

VI

Walsharno topped out on the crest of the rolling hill and halted. He raised his head, nostrils flaring, and Bahzell's face tightened bleakly as the two of them gazed out across the still-smoldering ruins. They'd been catching hints of smoke and slaughter for the last twenty or thirty minutes despite the fact that the night breeze was blowing almost directly from behind them. Now they knew why.

"So, *it's* after being Demonspawn," he rumbled in a voice like hammered iron.

"So it would appear," Walsharno agreed. "*Still, I wonder why they waited this long to let it feed.*"

The roan stallion's mental voice would have sounded calm, almost dispassionate, if anyone else had been able to hear it. It didn't sound that way to Bahzell.

"Now that's a thing I couldn't be telling you," the hradani said. "Unless, of course," he let his eyes sweep across the wreckage of the village, then looked up at the stars spangling the night sky's immensity, "they were thinking as how they'd just as soon have the two of us out here all alone before they were after letting us in on their little secret."

"I suppose that could be it. *But somehow, I've the feeling there's more to it.*"

This time, Bahzell only grunted. Walsharno was just as much a champion of Tomanâk as he was, and every champion's abilities differed from every other champion's, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes

more fundamentally. They perceived things in different ways, as well, and Bahzell had had plenty of proof that Walsharno's "hunches" tended to be dismayingly accurate.

"I'm thinking we'd best go take a closer look," the hradani said after several moments, and Walsharno moved slowly and cautiously down the slope towards the wreckage.

It couldn't be all that many hours old, Bahzell reflected. None of the houses had been particularly substantial. They wouldn't have taken very long to burn, yet embers still glowed in the darkness. They streaked the night with a faint glow, the color of blood, but Bahzell was hradani. Neither he nor Walsharno needed that fitful radiance to see what had happened here.

"Some of them at least tried to fight," Walsharno said, and Bahzell nodded grimly.

"Aye, that they did," he agreed, gazing at the torn and mutilated bodies. It was clear none of the village's defenders had had time to don armor—assuming any of them had possessed it—but it obviously wouldn't have mattered very much if they had. The claw marks and half-devoured state of the bodies was all the proof Bahzell or Walsharno would ever need about what had happened here, even without the familiar stench of evil and horror which no champion of Tomanâk could possibly misinterpret.

Then Walsharno halted. They'd passed the bodies of several men and women, all of them brutally mutilated and torn, but they'd been scattered about the village's muddy streets. Clearly, they'd been pulled down by ones and twos, but that had changed abruptly.

The ruined foundations of a much more substantial building smoldered before them, and the bodies of at least thirty men and women lay obscenely heaped about it. It was hard to be certain of the number, for not a single body Bahzell could see was intact. Most were so hideously torn, their bits and pieces so scattered, that it was difficult even to tell which had been male and which female. A pathetic handful of swords lay strewn in the blood-soaked mud among the carnage, but most of these people had been armed, if that was the word, with nothing more sophisticated than woodsman's axes, pitchforks, or other crude agricultural tools.

"So this was where they made their stand," Walsharno said heavily.

"Aye." A cold fire glowed in Bahzell Bahnakson's brown eyes. "Their town hall, I'm thinking."

"And are you thinking the same thing I am about why they did it?"

"That I am." Bahzell's voice was harsh. "I've not seen a single child. Not one," he said, and felt Walsharno's cold, bleak agreement deep in his own mind.

The hradani looked down at where the village's adults had died to the last man or woman, facing their impossible foes in what they must have known was the hopeless defense of their children, and his face might have been hammered out of old iron.

"Why did they want children, do you think?" Walsharno asked.

"I can be thinking of two or three reasons," Bahzell replied. "Old Demon Breath's fond enough of children's souls, after all. But I've the feeling it's not so simple as that this time." He gazed at the mangled bodies once more, and shook his head. "Whoever it is we're chasing wasn't after letting their cursed pet feed, Walsharno. Not really. There'd not be so many bodies, or bits of bodies, lying about if they had."

"You think they know we're on their heels?"

"Either that, or else they've some other pressing need to be someplace else. Someplace they're after looking to meet up with friends of theirs, I'm thinking."

"And they're taking the children to those "friends."" Walsharno considered the thought for a moment, then tossed his head. *"I suppose the real question is whether they're going to "meet up" with other worshipers of Sharnâ or someone else entirely."*

"As to that, we've no way of knowing. Still and all, it's happier I'd be in my own mind to know as how we were dealing with Demon Breath and no one else."

Walsharno tossed his head in agreement once more, and Bahzell drew a deep breath. Child sacrifices were always acceptable to any of the Dark Gods, but Sharnâ 's church usually preferred older ones. Victims with just enough experience to fully appreciate the horrific, lingering deaths Sharnâ 's worshipers dealt out, especially to summon or control their foul patron's demons. It was unlikely that those who served the Scorpion would have bothered to attack the village just to steal away its children.

But other Dark churches had different preferences. Carnadosa, for example. The lady of black sorcery did not delight in cruelty for cruelty's sake the way Sharnâ and some of the others did. But in many ways, her total amorality, her total *indifference* to cruelty or atrocity so long as its outcome served her needs, was almost worse. And all of her senior priests were also wizards, and children were prized when it came to the rites of blood magic.

"Sharnâ and Carnadosa don't like one another very much," Walsharno pointed out, following his bonded rider's thoughts with the ease of long familiarity. *"For that matter, none of the Dark Gods like one another all that much."*

"Aye, so I've heard," Bahzell said. "Still and all, for all folk keep telling me such as that, it's in my mind that you and I have been seeing them working hand in hand more often than not."

"Perhaps we're just lucky."

The irony in Walsharno's mental tone was only a frail mask for the icy fury burning at the courser's heart. Had he not bonded with Bahzell and become a champion of Tomanâk himself, Walsharno would almost certainly have eventually become a herd stallion, and the coursers didn't really think the way the Races of Man did. Each courser was an individual, true, but they saw themselves also collectively, as members of the herd. And, as members of the herd, each was responsible for the protection of all. Especially the herd stallions, who led and governed their herds . . . and who died to defend them.

Bahzell understood that, better even than another wind rider might have, for unlike most wind riders, he shared the coursers' herd sense. Even if he hadn't, *any* champion of Tomanâk would have shared the cold, bleak hatred burning like ice in Walsharno's heart.

"Well," the hradani said quietly, "I've no notion as to how lucky or unlucky you and I may be after being, Walsharno. But I'm thinking as how the scum as did *this* —" his mobile ears flattened as he swept one hand in an arc indicating the devastated village "— are after deserving a wee bit of ill luck all their very own."

"Indeed they do," Walsharno agreed.

"Then lets you and I be bringing it to them," Bahzell said. "But first . . ."

The hradani held out his right hand.

"Come," he said softly, and five feet of gleaming steel materialized in his fist as he summoned the sword which normally rode sheathed across his back.

He gripped it just below the quillons, holding it up hilt-first as the symbol of the god he served, and felt Walsharno joining with him, heart, mind, and soul.

"I'm thinking as how these folk fell in the service of Light," he said, speaking to the night and to their deity for both of them. "Any man or woman who dies defending children is one as I'm proud to call brother or sister. And I'll not leave my brothers or sisters to wolves and carrion-eaters."

"Are you certain about this, Bahzell?" an earthquake-deep voice asked in the back of his brain. *"Only their bodies remain with you."*

"Aye, it's certain I am—weare," Bahzell replied, knowing he spoke for Walsharno, and not at all surprised to hear Tomanâk's voice.

"Their souls already sit at Isvaria's table," Tomanâk's deep voice said. *"As you say, there's a special place reserved for those who die defending children, and my sister and I know our own."*

"I've no doubt of that," Bahzell said. "And it's happy I'll be to meet them someday. But until that day comes, Walsharno and I will be doing what we must, and we'll not leave them."

"You realize that if you do this, *the ones you're pursuing will know where you are, how close you are.*"

"Aye," Bahzell said simply.

"Aren't you going to ask me just who you are following?"

Bahzell heard the faint undertone of amusement in Tomanâk's voice, despite the grim horror of the scene about them.

"As to that, if I thought it was like to do me a single solitary bit of good, aye, I'd be asking. As it's not ___"

He shrugged, and felt a huge, immaterial hand rest lightly on his shoulder for a moment.

"You are my true Swords, *you and Walsharno*," the deep, rumbling voice said. *"But I will tell you this much. Brothers come in many forms, and from many places. You're right that this is Sharnâ's work. And I'm afraid your suspicion that it isn't Sharnâ alone you face is also correct. Yet the two of you will not face the Dark alone, either. Not even I know how it will all end, but this I do know—you'll find yourself in the best of company before it does."*

"In which case, I'm thinking we'd best be getting on with it, if it's all the same to you, and all," Bahzell said, and this time Tomanâk actually chuckled.

"Very well. *I suppose I should be accustomed to hradani—and courser . . . directness by now. Not*

to mention stubbornness. If the two of you are determined to do this thing, then let's do it right, you and I."

Bahzell didn't respond in words. Instead, he simply held his sword higher and felt Walsharno's will joining with his. He and the courser fused into a single whole, greater than either of them could ever be alone, and that fusion reached out to the blue-burning glory of their deity's presence.

Tomanâk reached back to them. The bonds which joined the three of them, normally almost imperceptible, yet always present, blazed with sudden, resurgent strength as Bahzell and Walsharno opened the channel between Tomanâk and the world of mortals wide. A pinnacle of brilliant blue light shot upwards, an azure needle stabbing into the starry heavens from the hradani's raised sword. Then a ring of blue fire exploded outward, sweeping through the gutted village, bathing that scene of horror in Tomanâk's cleansing light. The ring flashed across the mangled bodies, the blood, the grim residue of agony, despair, and courage, and when it passed, there were no more bodies, no more blood. There was only the night, the still-smoking ruins of an empty village, and a profound and abiding sense of peace.

Bahzell lowered his sword slowly, filled with a deep surge of satisfaction and content, and felt Tomanâk's hand upon his shoulder once again. Not in comfort, but in the approving clasp of a war leader for his most trusted sword companions. And as he and Walsharno shared that feeling, they also felt Tomanâk behind them, staring out into the night where any with eyes to see must recognize the explosion of power which had cleansed the village.

"Done!" Tomanâk's voice rang out, inaudible to mortal ears, yet deep and powerful enough to shake a universe, raised in a clarion challenge of his own. *"Done, O Darkness! Know my Swords are upon you, and tremble!"*

VII

"Phrobus! What was that?"

Garsalt's voice was high-pitched, almost shrill, his exclamation so sudden that Trayn was startled into jerking his head up in surprise.

He was lashed across the horse once more, jouncing painfully along as his captors headed back out across the rolling grasslands. They were following the course of the stream at which they'd stopped earlier, and he'd found it hard to remain motionless and limp once or twice when the horse under him pushed its way through the lashing branches of low-growing scrub. Despite that, he'd remembered to continue to feign unconsciousness with what certainly appeared to have been success.

Until now.

"What do you *think* it was, Garsalt?" Tremala's musical soprano demanded scornfully. "Let's see now. We know Wencit is somewhere *behind* us; *that* was in front of us, and you know how fond the Bloody Hand's always been of showing off. Hmmmm . . . doesn't that suggest at least one possibility to your teeny-tiny mind?"

"Yes, but —"

"Oh, grow a backbone, Garsalt! You *did* listen when the plan was explained to you, didn't you? Perhaps you should have taken notes, too. Lots of them, using short, easily spelled words."

"Of course I listened," Garsalt shot back in an angry semi-whine. "But we weren't supposed to meet him out here all by ourselves!"

"And we won't," Rethak put in. The shorter, dapper wizard sounded almost amused, Trayn thought. And then—without warning—a hard, ringing slap exploded across the back of the journeyman mage's head, sending fresh cascades of stars sparkling painfully across his vision.

"Awake, I see, Master Aldarfro," Rethak said nastily.

"Oh, he's been awake for hours." Tremala sounded amused, Trayn noticed, blinking on involuntary tears of pain. "I thought about mentioning it, but I decided a courteous host would let him get his rest. After all," her voice turned crueler, "he's going *toneed* it, isn't he?"

All three wizards laughed. It was a taunting, vicious sound, but Trayn heard more than amusement and anticipation in it. He heard the sound of small boys, whistling in the dark as they made their way through midnight woods.

There was no point pretending any longer, and he raised his head a bit higher, looking back at them. It was impossible to make out their expressions clearly in the darkness, but Trayn was a mage. Only a journeyman, perhaps, but still a mage. He didn't need to see their expressions to know his original impression of their nervousness was accurate.

"If you knew he was awake, why didn't you say something?" Garsalt demanded.

"Perhaps because I wanted to see if he really did have any 'deadly powers of the mind'." Tremala's sugary-sweet tone turned the last five words into a sneer. "After all, I knew he was awake, so he was hardly going to surpriseme with any sudden attacks. If he was going to kill anyone, well, I suppose it would have been one of you two, wouldn't it?" Both her male companions turned to glower at her, and she laughed. "At least it would have let me kill two birds with one stone, as it were. It would have confirmed just how 'deadly' these magi are . . . and relieved me of putting up with at least one of you into the bargain."

Neither of the others seemed to share her amusement, Trayn noticed, and managed not to flinch when Rethak's open palm smashed across the back of his head once again.

"Stop that, Rethak," Tremala said mildly. "You have better things to do than take out your anxieties on Master Aldarfro."

"I don't like magi," Rethak grated.

"And you're scared enough of Bahzell to need a new set of breeches, too, now that you know he and that outsized nag of his are in the vicinity," Tremala half-sneered. "You really ought to do something more useful with all that energy, you know. Besides, we need Master Aldarfro . . . undamaged. For now."

Trayn could have done without those last two words, but at least Rethak stopped hitting him in the head. Which, he decided, wasn't actually all that much of an improvement when he found himself looking into Tremala's dark eyes, instead. The sorceress smiled thinly at him, with the amused malice a cat reserved for the mouse under its claws.

"I wouldn't get too comfortable, little mage," she told him softly. "You may be too valuable to play games with at the moment, but, then, we weren't sent to collect you for our amusement, either. Certain . . .

parties have gotten a bit curious about these mind powers you magi seem to possess. And that rather irritating Council of Semkirk of yours is becoming a bit annoying. We don't really mind all that much as long as you only make problems for your . . . ah, *homegrown* practitioners, shall we say? But you're beginning to inconvenience *us* as well, so our superiors want a mage all their very own to play with. To study." Her smile could have been used as a scalpel. "To . . . dissect."

Trayn was astounded when he found himself continuing to meet her gaze without flinching.

"They must find us quite a bit more than 'annoying' if you've come all this way just to trap a journeyman mage who hasn't even completed his studies yet," he heard his own voice say. "I imagine your 'superiors' would have preferred someone a bit more experienced in the use of his powers. Or perhaps not." He actually managed to bare his teeth at her. "Perhaps they thought it would be . . . *safer* all round to settle for a journeyman?"

"*Rethak*," Tremala said. Trayn had prepared himself for the fresh blow, but the sorceress' voice stopped the wizard in mid-swing. She tilted her head to one side, regarding Trayn thoughtfully, then shrugged.

"You've a bit more spunk than I anticipated, Master Aldarfo," she acknowledged. "And for all I know, there may actually be something to your theory. On the other hand, it's not often we're given the name of a specific individual they want to see. And I'm very much afraid," she shook her head in mock sympathy, "that it often ends . . . badly for the individuals in question when we are."

"I'm flattered." He hoped she couldn't tell how hard it was to keep his voice level when someone had just replaced the marrow of his bones with ice. "But isn't this the point in all the really bad stories where the gloating villains tell their hapless victim all about their grand, complicated plans?"

"I believe it is," she agreed. "I, on the other hand, have better things to do with my time. We're about to have a few other guests we need to keep properly entertained, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you to your own devices. Do try to keep yourself amused."

She smiled brightly at him, pressed with a heel, and went cantering off into the darkness.

"Don't worry." Rethak's tone was ugly as Trayn let his neck muscles relax and pressed his face back into the side of the horse over which he was bound. "You'll find plenty to keep you '*entertained*' where you're going, mage. I'll look forward to helping amuse you."

VIII

"Things are getting complicated," Wencit murmured.

Ken Houghton heard the wizard over his earphones and glanced at him. Wencit was gazing off into the darkness in the direction of the brilliant blue lightning flash which had split the night. Gauging distances in the dark was always difficult, but the flash had to have been even further off than it had looked. Houghton hadn't heard even the faintest rumble, and any lightning bolt that brilliant must have been accompanied by the mother of all thunderclaps.

He waited for Wencit to say something more, but the wizard only frowned thoughtfully as long, slow seconds trickled past.

"I beg your pardon?" Houghton said finally, and wanted to laugh at his own astonishingly banal turn of phrase.

"Um?" Wencit turned towards him, wildfire eyes thinning down into bright slits.

"You said things are getting complicated." Houghton chuckled with harsh irony. "Given the way Jack and I got here in the first place, and all of the certifiably insane things you've had to say since we did, '*getting complicated*' isn't exactly a phrase I'm delighted to be hearing."

"I can see how you might feel that way," Wencit conceded with a chuckle of his own. "And I really didn't mean to sound mysterious. It's just that I've been continuing that wrestling match I mentioned to you earlier, and I think their glamour's sprung a slight leak. Unless, of course, they*wanted* to let me have a peek inside."

"And why might they have wanted anything like that?"

"I couldn't really say . . . yet." Wencit shrugged. "It's rather like a game of chess, I suppose. Or perhaps the sort of misdirection in which a stage conjurer specializes. You show the other fellow what you*hope* he'll see in order to keep him from noticing the knuckleduster coming at him from an entirely different direction." He snorted. "As a matter of fact, I've done it myself, on occasion."

"Somehow I fail to find that particularly reassuring," Houghton said dryly while Tough Mama continued to snort along. The JP-8 in the LAV's fuel tanks had fallen to about the halfway point, and Houghton hoped they weren't going to end up running them dry before they got wherever the hell they were supposed to be going.

"Did that 'peek' of yours tell you how much further we've got to go?" he asked.

"No," Wencit said. "But*that*—" he waved one-handed in the direction of the silent lightning bolt "—tells me quite a bit."

"How?"

"That flash was Bahzell," Wencit said simply.

"So he's a lightning rod, is he?"

"As a matter of fact," Wencit actually laughed out loud, "that's a remarkably good description of Bahzell Bahnakson, in a great many ways. But the lightning didn't*strike* him, Gunnery Sergeant. It came*from* him. Well, from him and Walsharno."

"Sure it did." Houghton decided he should have sounded rather more skeptical than he actually did.

"They can be a bit flamboyant," Wencit said. "Mind you, Bahzell is a Horse Stealer, too. He knows the value of creeping about in the bushes, and he's quite good at it, when he puts his mind to it. But he must have decided the 'bad guys,' as you call them, already know he's in the vicinity. You might say that was his way of warning them that he knows*they* are, as well."

"And he thinks sending up flares to tell the other side he's coming is a good idea because —?"

"I could say it's because he's a champion of Tomanâk. Or because he's a hradani. Both of those statements are true, and either one would be more than enough to explain it. But I imagine the simple truth is that he and Walsharno are*angry*, Gunnery Sergeant. And, believe me, you really don't want to

be the person who makes those two angry."

"But if you're already concerned about the odds, doesn't that mean . . . ?"

Houghton let his voice trail off. There was no need to finish the question, after all.

"Very few champions of Tomanâk die in bed." There was little humor left in Wencit's quiet reply.

"Bahzell is capable of remarkable subtlety, despite the slow-talking barbarian persona he's fond of presenting to the unwary, but at the heart of him, where all the things that made him a champion in the first place come together, he doesn't let the odds dictate his actions."

"Great," Houghton grunted in a long-suffering tone. "I end up in an entirely different universe, and I'm *still* dealing with John Waynes."

"John Waynes?" Wencit repeated.

"Idiots who have trouble separating movies—stories—from reality and think they're immortal and bulletproof because they're the heroes of the piece. Or the kind who still think people win wars by dying for their countries, instead of encouraging the other guy to die for *his* country. Or, even worse, who just don't care what happens to them—or anyone else—as long as they're dying for 'the cause.' Whatever the hell 'the cause' happens to *bet* *this* week. Trust me, I've seen more than enough of that kind of fanatic to last me two or three lifetimes, Wencit!"

"Bahzell Bahnakson is as far from a fanatic as any man you're ever going to meet," Wencit said sternly. "And he doesn't think for a moment that he's 'immortal' or invincible. In fact, I'm fairly certain he fully expects to die one day in the service of his god. Not because he 'doesn't care' or because he's eager to die, or because he thinks there's anything particularly glorious about it. He expects to die, Gunnery Sergeant, because he's constitutionally incapable of standing aside and letting the Dark triumph. Because he recognizes that all *mendie*, but that some of them get to choose to do it standing on their own two feet, with a sword in their hands, standing between the Dark and its victims."

Houghton started to throw something back at the wizard. Something flippant. The sort of witticism he and his peers regularly used to deflate pretension and guard against any belief in such antiquated and dangerous concepts as "heroism" or "honor." But the flippancy died unspoken, because in that moment he realized those concepts weren't antiquated, after all. That they lingered at the very core of the code to which he and those peers continued to adhere, however unwilling they were to admit it to anyone else . . . or even to themselves.

No one knew better than Kenneth Houghton just how ugly, savage, and vile war truly was. How voracious its appetite was, how appallingly it chewed up and crushed the innocent, as well as the guilty. How little of "glory" there was to its reality. Indeed, it was that ugliness and savagery which had sent Houghton into uniform in the first place. The belief—naïve, perhaps, yet no less real for that—that he could make a difference, protect the things in which he believed, the people who could not protect themselves. The belief that there truly were things worth dying for, however much a man might want to live.

And be honest, Ken, he told himself. *There was a reason you chose the Corps. The few. The proud. The Marines. You wanted to be a part of that. To be known not just as a soldier, but as a warrior. As someone who'd chosen to make that commitment, to be one of the best in the service of what you believed in. So, are you really so different from this Bahzell of Wencit's?*

"What can you tell me about the odds he's facing now?" he said instead. "Do you have any better fix on that than you did have?"

"I imagine he's starting to suspect there's more going on here than the surface might indicate," Wencit replied. "What he may not have realized is that he's up against at least two separate Dark Gods' servants. By now, I'm sure he's figured out that what he's actually been following are servants of Sharnâ , which means he's expecting assassins and demons. But he probably *hasn't* realized that the raiders he's pursuing are working in concert with the wizards they're about to meet up with. Or, for that matter, that it's almost as important to the Dark to kill the mage those wizards have captured as it is to kill him and Walsharno."

"Wait a minute. ?ëMage'? You mean another wizard?"

"No, not a wizard at all. A mage's powers come solely from within. They aren't like the art, at all."

"Than what makes *him* so damned important?" Houghton knew he sounded exasperated, and didn't especially care. "Just how many people are these 'Dark Gods' of yours gunning for out here, anyway, Wencit? I mean, is there *anyone* in Norfressa who's not on their 'Needs Killing' list?"

"I don't suppose anyone could blame you for wondering about that, under the circumstances," Wencit said wryly. "The problem is that a great many currents, plans, and possibilities are beginning to come together. It's not quite time yet, but both sides—the Dark *and* the Light—know the Fall of Kontovar, however cataclysmic it may have been, actually *decided* nothing. It gives the Dark the advantage at present, but the true battle has yet to be settled. For that matter, it has yet to be fully *joined* , and the Dark Gods are doing all they can to eliminate the people most critical to the Light's chances of final victory. Bahzell is one of those people. Which is one of the reasons *I've* been so bent on keeping him alive. Mind you, I've got personal motives of my own, especially now, but those weren't what brought him to my attention in the first place."

The wizard shook his head, then snorted.

"Actually, in a peculiar sort of way, Bahzell acts as a sort of . . . focusing lens. You can almost use him like some living compass or dowsing rod. The Dark can't seem to stop trying to pick him off, despite how . . . costly the process keeps turning out to be. And along the way, their servants keep adding other people to the list as they become aware of those others' importance to the future events swirling about him. Which tends to identify those same people *for me* if I haven't already noticed them on my own."

"In all the stories about this kind of stuff back home, wizards and gods can see the future," Houghton said.

"It doesn't work quite that way." Wencit shook his head. "Seeing the future—in any sort of useful detail, at any rate—is almost impossible, even for a wild wizard. Most wizards can see the *past* , and there are stories about wizards who could actually travel *into* the past, although it's always seemed to me that only a lunatic or an extraordinarily desperate man would try to do it. It's . . . complicated. For one thing, no one can travel into his *own* past, the past of his own universe. He can only travel into the past of another universe, and if he does, he can change things there. Most often in completely unpredictable ways.

"The same sort of problems apply to seeing the future, if not in quite the same way," the wizard continued, obviously warming to his topic. "Even if you can do it, then you're like the dragons. You don't see *one* future; you see all *possible* futures, or as many of them as a mortal is capable of seeing, at least. That's one reason conversations with dragons can seem so . . . peculiar. Gods *can* see all possible futures, but not even they can tell ahead of time which particular future will transpire in which particular

universe. And, just to make things even more interesting, the Dark Gods and the Gods of Light spend quite a bit of their time trying to confuse their respective opponents as to which of the various futures they can see are most likely to occur.

"Now, the precognitive mage talent doesn't work quite that way, which is one reason wizards find it so fascinating. Apparently, the way *it* works is —"

"Stop," Houghton said plaintively. "You're making my brain hurt. What you're telling me is that no one really knows what's going to happen, only what they think is most *likely* going to happen, right?"

"More or less," Wencit agreed. "As the occupants of any particular universe get closer and closer to an event, though, the possibilities for the particular outcome they're going to experience in their universes begin to narrow down into *probabilities*. That's the point the predictors on either side look for—the point at which they can begin to accurately identify the most critical players."

"Like this 'mage' of yours, I suppose," Houghton said, nodding his head slowly. "But if he's so damned important and they've already got their hands on him, why don't they simply go ahead and slit his throat right now?"

"Arrogance, mostly." Wencit shrugged. "Distrust probably comes into it, as well, and self-interest is definitely a factor. In fact, to be honest, self-interest's probably an even bigger factor than arrogance, really. I told you the Dark Gods don't get along with each other a great deal better than they get along with the Gods of Light. None of them quite trusts the others, and all of them—and their servants—are constantly scheming to make sure they don't inadvertently improve one of their rivals' positions more than their own.

"At the moment, I suspect, the Carnadosans are holding out for a mage to study as their price for cooperating with Sharnâ's church in the first place. They don't understand the mage powers at all—there *are* no magi in Kontovar; they exist only in Norfressa—and the Council of Semkirk, which consists of magi specifically pledged to fight black sorcery, is one of their major potential stumbling blocks. So, I'm sure they find the notion of studying Trayn—Trayn Aldarfro, the mage they've captured—particularly amusing. After all, why not get as much additional benefit as possible out of eliminating someone important to Bahzell's future? I'm sure they'll be perfectly willing to simply go ahead and kill him in order to keep him from being *rescued*, but they'd really prefer to use him as their . . . specimen. If he might otherwise have played a significant role in their defeat, then they'll take a particularly vengeful pleasure in destroying him—as painfully and slowly as possible—in the course of learning how best to combat *all* magi."

Houghton nodded slowly. He'd never met any of the followers of the Dark Wencit was describing—not the ones from *this* universe, at any rate—but he was bitterly familiar with the same mindset. He'd seen it often enough.

"So what we basically have here," he said, voicing his thoughts in the process of organizing them, "is two theoretically allied factions who actually hate each others' guts. They have common enemies they both want to beat, but they're simultaneously trying to protect and strengthen their own power bases for the dogfight between all the various factions on their own side after they've kicked the snot out of the *other* side. Which means that while they're willing to cooperate, more or less, in this little operation, each of them has its own price, and the 'Carnadosans' price is this Aldarfro as their guinea pig. Their experimental animal, I mean."

"Exactly."

"And the other faction? This 'Sharnâ ' you keep talking about. What's his side's special price?"

"Oh, *Sharnâ* 's price is Bahzell himself," Wencit said softly. "None of the Dark Gods like what may happen if Bahzell lives, but Sharnâ likes it even less than his relatives do. Part of it's going to be much more . . . personally painful for him. In fact, there's probably only one person in all of Norfressa Sharnâ would rather see dead than Bahzell."

"And would that person happen to be *you*?"

"Actually, no. I'm probably no higher than third, possibly even fourth, on Sharnâ 's list. His attention's on some rather younger people. And as much as he and his friends and family—well, family, at any rate; I don't really think Sharnâ *has* any friends—would love to see me killed, I'm not one of the main attractions for this particular 'little operation,' as you put it."

"But on the other hand," Houghton said, gazing at the wizard shrewdly through his NVG, "here you are, walking straight into it. And from what you're saying, you've been doing that sort of thing for quite some time. Which, given as how you're talking about gods pulling strings on the other side, suggests to my naturally suspicious mind that they've probably made at least some allowance in their plans for dealing with *you* ."

"No doubt they have," Wencit conceded with what Houghton privately thought was rather appalling cheerfulness. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because of his own proximity to Wencit and whatever the other side might have planned for him, the Marine admitted to himself.

"No doubt they have," Wencit repeated. "On the other hand, none of the gods—Light or Dark—can act too openly in the mortal world. As I pointed out earlier, if they started having direct confrontations with one another, they'd probably destroy this entire universe, which would rather tend to make their entire struggle over who it belongs to ultimately pointless. That particular restriction is one of the reasons Bahzell—and I—keep so stubbornly and persistently surviving."

"I see. And might I hope that you intend to do some more of that stubborn surviving *this* time?"

"Oh, indeed I do," Wencit said softly, his smile broad and somehow almost gentle. "Indeed, I do, Gunnery Sergeant. I've got far too many things still to do . . . and too many people still to meet. Dying would be *much* too inconvenient."

IX

Trayn raised his head again as the horse under him began scrambling up out of the stream's deep bed. His skin and, even more, his mind had begun to prickle with a sudden sense of something mortals had never been intended to encounter, and this time he did swallow—hard—as something much too much like panic flickered deep inside him. He felt the horse under him stiffening, felt the tension tightening its muscles, as it, too, became aware of whatever he'd just detected, and he didn't blame the beast one bit. He'd never sensed anything remotely like it, but his mage talent screamed in warning, and whatever he was sensing was getting steadily nearer.

His captors' horses topped out over the edge of the streambed, but they also continued to climb. The hill they were ascending was considerably taller than most of the others in its vicinity, and he wondered why they were climbing up it, instead of skirting around its foot. He was still wondering when he found out.

The horse under him turned sharply to the left, and then, suddenly, they were riding straight into the hillside.

The opening was at least thirty-five or forty feet across, and Trayn's eyes narrowed as they passed through some immaterial yet tangible barrier which had somehow restrained the light glittering from the chandelier-like balls suspended from the roof. The barrier had kept the light from spilling out of the opening, but now that he was inside it and had the light to see clearly, he realized the tunnel was clearly artificial, for the walls which embraced them as they headed steadily deeper were of dressed and carefully fitted stone. The workmanship was as fine as anything he might have seen in the imperial capital, yet there was something . . . wrong about it. The angles were subtly off true, as if the architect's geometry was askew somehow. Twisted. Perhaps it was only the inner sense of peril and debased energy crackling in his mage talent, but he felt a sudden, instinctive certainty that the architect in question had never come from any of the Races of Man. Or, if he'd begun there, he'd been twisted into something else before he ever designed this splendidly built tunnel.

As they moved deeper, the smooth, featureless stone gave way to glittering mosaics, and Trayn Aldarfro's belly muscles knotted into a solid lump of iron. He'd expected to see Carnadosa's symbols, the wizard's wand representing her status as the patron deity of black sorcery. What he actually saw was the loathsome scorpion of Sharnâ , Lord of Demons and patron of assassins.

Trayn swallowed again, harder, as nausea rose in the back of his throat. The scenes reproduced in the tunnel mosaics were horrifying images exulting in massacre and slaughter. Images of huge, spiked and spiny demons—monstrous creatures out of nightmare, twisted fusions of insect, lizard, and bat—rampaged through shrieking crowds of terrified fugitives while towns and cities blazed like torches in the night. Huge mandibles snapped warriors and warhorses in two while arrow storms rebounded from chitinous hides and monstrous carapaces as harmlessly as so many raindrops. Pincers and monstrous claws tore other warriors apart, and vast gullets lined with fang-like hooks swallowed screaming victims alive.

Yet terrible as those scenes were, there were worse. *Far* worse. There were images of the rites of sacrifice which allowed Sharnâ 's worshipers to command his demonic servants. It was agony and despair, even more than the victims' blood and life essence itself, that fed Sharnâ 's dark appetites and bound his demons to the service of mortals. The death of any sacrifice to the Dark was terrible; the deaths Sharnâ demanded—like those relished by his sister Krahana—went beyond terror and horror to the unspeakable.

Trayn managed, finally, to close his eyes. It was much harder than he would have anticipated. There was something almost mesmerizing about that sheer, soul-crushing delight in cruelty for cruelty's sake. Something that threatened to suck the viewer in and drown him in the endless, poisonous ecstasy of pure, enthralling evil which Sharnâ promised to those who served him.

"I love what they've done with the place," Tremala said lightly to Garsalt and Rethak. Her amused tone was obscene against that backdrop of transcendent horror, yet Trayn suspected that amusement was a frail and tattered shield, even to her own ears, against the waves of malevolence, the simultaneous hatred and hunger for all that lived, which filled that broad, splendidly built tunnel like some sort of poisonous incense.

"I don't like being underground," Garsalt muttered.

"Oh?" Trayn kept his eyes closed, but he could readily imagine the tilt of Tremala's head, the scornful arch of an elegant eyebrow. "I suppose, then, that you'd rather meet the Bloody Hand—and Wencit; let's

not forget about *him*, shall we?—out in the open somewhere? Somewhere where they could come at us from any direction of their choosing?"

"He's not worrying about the direction they come *from*, Tremala," Rethak said biting. "He's worried about the fact that there's only one direction he can run *towards* after they get here."

"And you want us to think Bahzell and Wencit don't scare the shit right out of you, too, I suppose," Garsalt shot back with a strength which surprised Trayn just a bit.

"Only an idiot wouldn't be at least a little nervous, Garsalt." Tremala sounded as if she'd been surprised, as well, judging by her almost conciliating tone. "After all, both of them have rather daunting records of success—especially Wencit, if we're going to be honest. Still, if I have to choose between being able to run in more than one direction and knowing exactly where someone like Wencit, or the Bloody Hand and his courser, has to come at me, I'll choose knowing. After all, by and large, running doesn't really help a lot in a situation like that, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," Garsalt half-muttered in agreement. Still, he sounded at least a little mollified, Trayn noticed. Although that might be simply because he wanted so badly to be reassured.

"And here's our host," Tremala said suddenly a moment later.

Trayn's eyes slipped open once more, but this time he kept them resolutely turned away from the mosaics "decorating" the tunnel walls. He couldn't see very much of anything else, because of the other horses crowded around the one to which he was lashed. It would appear that those horses, or perhaps their riders, wanted to stay as far away from the mosaics as Trayn did, but some of the crowding parted as someone else walked through it.

"Greetings, Tremala," a voice said. "I was beginning to think you might have decided not to come, after all."

The voice was deep, resonant, and smooth as velvet. It was the sort of voice that instinctively charmed and soothed. Unless, of course, one listened to what lurked in those almost caressing depths. At the moment, the slight but unmistakable edge directed at Tremala made it a bit easier to hear the bared fangs of that inner hunger.

The horses between the speaker and Tremala finished moving aside with an uneasy edginess. If they'd wanted to avoid the mosaics, they wanted to avoid the newcomer just as badly, and Trayn didn't blame them.

"Timing is everything, Cherdahn," Tremala replied calmly. "If we'd arrived any sooner, someone like the Bloody Hand would certainly have realized we were here, don't you think?"

"I suppose he would," Cherdahn agreed. "And," his smile showed curiously sharp and pointy teeth, "I suppose Wencit would have realized *we* were here, too."

Cherdahn was very tall, and the thumb-sized, carved emerald scorpion of a high priest of Sharnâ glittered under the overhead light. Simply to possess that symbol was punishable by death in virtually all Norfressan realms, but here it hung against the breast of his richly embroidered scarlet robes, openly displayed in this place consecrated to the monstrous deity he served. His hair, almost as black as Tremala's, was shoulderlength, immaculately groomed and lightly frosted with silver, and his lean, strong-boned face and aquiline nose gave him a distinguished, almost scholarly appearance. Until one

looked more closely, that was. Close enough to see the peculiar glitter of his skin, the fine pattern that looked undeniably like scales. Or the equally peculiar red glow—surely more sensed than seen—that appeared to glow in the depths of his brown eyes, the way a Dwarvenhame furnace glowed behind the closed door of its firebox.

Trayn had the eyes—and talents—to take that closer look, and nausea rose into the back of his throat again as he realized what he was actually seeing. No wonder no horse wanted to be any closer to Cherdahn than it had to be!

"My dear Cherdahn," Tremala half-laughed, "surely you don't think Wencit of Rûm could possibly have failed to realize that *someone* besides us is waiting for him?" She shook her head with an insouciance in the face of Cherdahn's presence which warned Trayn that she must be even more powerful in her own right than he'd been assuming. "He's been chipping away at my glamour for *days* now, and I'd be astonished if he hadn't already deduced most of what we're up to long before he ever saw the Bloody Hand's little lightning flash."

"Indeed?" Cherdahn's voice remained as deep, as polished. As hungry. Yet Trayn knew Tremala had scored a hit of her own.

"Oh, yes, indeed." This time Tremala did laugh out loud. "That's what makes him so persistently . . . irritating. Still, he's also persistently *predictable*. The subtlety, Cherdahn, was involved in getting *Bahzell* here against odds sufficiently daunting to convince Wencit that this time the Bloody Hand and his little horsey were going to need all the help they could get."

"So, you see the Scorpion as bait?" Cherdahn inquired almost genially.

"Of course I do. But not *just* as bait. Even laying aside the fact that He and the Lady are allies, no one but a fool—which, I assure you, I'm not—would ever underestimate the power of His greater servants. True, they haven't fared especially well against the Bloody Hand in the past, but, then neither have the Lady's efforts and servants, have we?" Tremala shook her head. "Dealing with Bahzell, especially with Wencit in the vicinity, is going to require the combination of all our strength. Still, there's no point in denying that the Scorpion's presence is always almost impossible to conceal from one of Tomanâk's champions. Which is why His and the Lady's plans decided to . . . make use of that fact. Turn a challenge into an advantage, as it were. And, of course, our own modest efforts to insure that Wencit would be looking in the right direction at the critical moment constitute 'bait' in their own right."

"I see." Cherdahn gazed up at her for several moments, then shrugged. "I don't suppose I could quibble with any of that. And, as you say, at the moment things seem to be proceeding quite nicely. Won't you dismount and join us for supper? We ought to just about have time to finish dining before the first of our guests arrive."

X

"I truly do hate these miserable holes in the ground," Walsharno said in the depths of Bahzell's brain.

The starry night had wrapped itself in a thickening shroud of cloud, and the hradani smelled rapidly approaching rain on a strengthening wind out of the east. The disappearance of the stars and the orange sliver of moon which had floated among them had turned the night pitchy black, but Walsharno was a courser and Bahzell was a hradani, and both of them could see with remarkable clarity.

Not that either of them was very happy about *what* they could see.

"I've no doubt at all, at all, as how old Demon Breath would never dream of upsetting you if you'd only be telling him that," Bahzell responded to Walsharno's disgusted observation.

"Very funny. And I suppose you'll still be laughing when we ride into that outsized drainpipe?"

"I'm not so very sure we're going to be doing any riding down it," Bahzell said rather more seriously.

"Going in there all by yourself wouldn't be the brightest thing even a hradani has ever done," Walsharno pointed out acidly.

"And are you after telling me that agreeing to be one of himself's champions and all *was* after being a 'bright' thing for a hradani to be doing?"

"Don't try to laugh it off. You and I both know there's more than enough trouble for any two—or three—champions waiting in there."

"Aye, that there may be. Still and all, Walsharno, I'm thinking it's not so very likely as there'd be fighting room for you."

The hradani turned to look at his companion. At just over seven feet, nine inches, no one—not even another Horse Stealer—would ever consider Bahzell a small man, but Walsharno stood twenty-four and a half hands. Bahzell's head didn't quite top the huge stallion's shoulder.

"You're not exactly a puny little fellow, yourself," the courser pointed out.

"That's as may be, but I'm better suited to be fighting in twisty little corners underground than *you* are," Bahzell retorted, and felt Walsharno's unwilling agreement.

Few creatures in all of Norfressa could match a Sothôii courser stallion for lethality, but a "horse," the size of Walsharno needed fighting space. Needed to be able to rear and kick, needed the ability to dodge.

"That opening looks big enough for both of us," Walsharno said after a moment.

"Aye. But who's to say it stays that way? I'm thinking that if/were after setting a trap for the two of us, we'd find that 'drainpipe' of yours getting a mite tight just about the time we were running into one of Demon Breath's wee little pets."

"So you think that instead I should let you go down there all by yourself?" Walsharno snorted as emphatically as only a courser could. *"I always knew Brandark was a smart man. Now I see why he never wanted to let you out without a keeper!"*

"I'm not saying as how you should 'let' me be doing anything of the sort. It's not as if we were having any real choice, is it now?"

Walsharno snaked his head around and lowered it to look Bahzell in the eye. Silence lingered for several seconds until, manifestly against his will, the stallion tossed his head in grudging agreement.

"Why do we always have to be the ones going into *their miserable little burrows*?" he said after a moment. *"Why can't they come riding openly up to our gates for a change?"*

"Because we're the good fellows, and they're the bad fellows," Bahzell said lightly. "Still and all," he reached up, unhooked a case of oiled leather from his saddle, and extracted the deadly horse bow of a wind-rider, "I'm thinking as how it's not so very likely we'll be creeping into *yonder*' miserable little burrow' without someone noticing."

He strung the bow smoothly and easily. It had taken his fellow wind riders a long time to convince him to give up his steel-bowed arbalest, and he still wasn't as good an archer as most of them were. They, after all, had literally grown up in the saddle, bows in hand. Bahzell had been doing other things—like raiding the Sothôii himself—at a comparable point in his own life. Still, the horse bow's rate of fire was far higher than even a Horse Stealer crossbowman could manage, and if Bahzell was a bit less accurate, he could pull a bow far heavier than any mere human. In the final analysis, the sheer, incredible power of his weapon made up for quite a lot.

"Do try to avoid shooting yourself—or me—in the foot with that thing, would you?"

"And aren't you just the funniest thing on four feet?" Bahzell replied, attaching his quiver to the right side of his belt.

"I try, at any rate. *I promised Brandark I'd keep you from getting too full of yourself.*"

"Remind me to be thanking him the next time I see him."

"I imagine you'll remember all on your own," Walsharno reassured him.

Bahzell snorted, then turned to study the hillside above them.

Most people would never have realized there was anything there, but Bahzell and Walsharno weren't most people. Both of them could sense the dark miasma hiding in the heart of the hill, and the cloaking power of Sharnâ which should have hidden the tunnel opening was useless against the eyes of any champion of Tomanâk.

Bahzell bared his teeth as he saw the loathsome image of Sharnâ's scorpion, carved into the keystone of the outer arch, and he remembered the first time he'd seen that same image. What he *didn't* see was anything remotely like a sentry, and that worried him.

"I'm thinking as how they must know we're out here," he said.

"After what happened at the village?" Walsharno snorted yet again, this time in emphatic agreement.

"Then wouldn't you think it's just a mite overconfident they're being with no one posted to be keeping an eye out for us?"

Walsharno nodded, and Bahzell's frown deepened. Although Sharnâ couldn't hide the entrance from him or Walsharno by arcane means, things could still be physically concealed, and there was an uncomfortable crawling sensation between Bahzell's shoulder blades.

"Well," he sighed, "I'm thinking there's only one way to be finding out what it is they've got in mind."

It was remarkable how quiet something the size of a Sothôii courser could be when it put its mind to it. Walsharno's ability to move almost soundlessly, even through underbrush, had always impressed Bahzell. He himself had spent years honing his ability to do the same thing, and he was far smaller than the stallion, with only two feet, to boot. Despite that, Walsharno made little more noise than *he* would have made by himself, and what sounds they did make were lost in the sigh of the steadily strengthening night wind.

Thunder mutter-grumbled, and lightning flickered blue-white against the clouds far to the east. It was coming closer, and there was something almost soothing about the natural power of the oncoming storm.

No wind-rider would have dreamed of using reins, and no courser would have tolerated such an impertinence if he had. Nor was anything so crude required. Walsharno was linked with Bahzell, their thoughts flickering back and forth almost as if they were a single being. There was no need for Bahzell to tell Walsharno where to go, or for Walsharno to tell Bahzell where they *were* going.

Which, Bahzell reflected as he nocked an arrow, also left both of his hands free for other purposes.

Walsharno emerged from the last few feet of the undergrowth fringing the streambed and started up the slope just as quietly and cautiously. The sense of the evil flowing out of the tunnel opening spilled down the hillside like a viscous tide, black as tar and just as clinging. The stallion breasted its flow, forging upward against it, and Bahzell felt the two of them settling into even deeper fusion.

"Now, Brother?"

"Not quite," Bahzell murmured back. "Let's be getting as close as we can before —"

The night suddenly shattered as something even darker and blacker than it was, and almost as enormous, exploded from the tunnel mouth. Bahzell's mind insisted that it couldn't possibly have squeezed itself into an opening that small as huge, segmented spider-like legs—blacker than black, yet glaring with sick green light for eyes that could see—and ribbed, bat-like wings unfolded themselves. A head that belonged on something from night-black depths where sunlight never shone opened its mouth to bare curving fangs half as long as Bahzell, and the demon shrieked its fury as it launched itself down the hillside towards them with all the impossible quickness of its hell-born kind.

"*Tomanâk!*" Bahzell bellowed in reply, and heard Walsharno's defiant challenge echoing deep inside him. The clean blue corona of Tomanâk snapped into sudden, glittering existence about them both, and Bahzell reached out. It was as if he stretched one hand to Tomanâk and the other to Walsharno, and a stuttering electrical shock exploded through him as their hands reached back.

"*Tomanâk!*" he shouted once more, drawing that shared strength and support deep into him even as he called the Rage's transcendent power to him.

His bow sang with a musical, chirping snap. A steel-headed war arrow howled from the string, and the azure power of Tomanâk touched it. It flashed across the night like a blue meteor, and the demon shrieked again—this time in as much pain as fury—as the meteor slammed into its long, sinuous neck. It struck just below the head, and blinding light exploded from the point of impact.

The hideous creature flailed its head in obvious anguish, but its charge barely hesitated, and Walsharno wheeled on his haunches, then sprang into a full gallop with a speed only another courser could possibly have matched.

The days when Bahzell had sat the saddle like an abandoned sack of meal were long past. He and his

courser were one being, and his right hand flashed down to the quiver at his belt. Another arrow fitted itself flawlessly, perfectly, to the string, and he sighted, drew, and released in one flowing motion.

Another blue-flaming arrow shrieked across the night, but this time the demon wasn't taken by surprise. Mere arrows had never posed a threat to it in the past. They'd rattled uselessly, harmlessly, off its hard scales and thick carapace, but *these* arrows were a very different matter, indeed. Not only could they drill effortlessly through its armor, but they exploded deep within its unnatural flesh like lightning bolts when they did. Yet this was one of Sharnâ 's greater demons. It was more than a mere appetite. It was capable of *thought* . It could learn from experience, and it realized that these arrows *could* hurt it and twisted aside with the lizard-fast quickness of its breed. It couldn't completely evade the arrow—not one fired by Bahzell Bahnakson at a range of under fifty yards—yet the steel head which should have struck its throat almost on top of the original ichor-spurting wound struck it in the chest, instead.

The demon staggered, howling in fresh pain and fury, but it didn't go down. Instead, it gathered its feet under it once again, wings beating for balance, and lunged. The wind from those flailing wings buffeted Bahzell and Walsharno like some foul-smelling hurricane, and there wasn't time for another shot. Bahzell dropped his bow and raised his hands, summoning his blade, and five feet of burnished steel, glaring with the blue furnace-fury of the war god, appeared in them.

"*Tomanâk!*"

Walsharno charged to meet the demon, screaming the wordless whistle of his own war cry, and the glittering sword hissed as it descended in a two-handed blow like Tomanâk's own mace.

The demon twisted its head out of the way at the very last instant, and Bahzell's sword slammed into one of its wings, instead. A fountain of blue light exploded upward, the demon shrieked, and Walsharno pivoted with lithe, impossible grace. He swerved to one side, and both rear hoofs lashed out, ablaze with the same blue glare as Bahzell's sword. They caught the demon in the side with a gruesome, ear-shattering "*CRACK!*" of splintering carapace and a fresh eruption of blue lightning.

Not even a greater demon could shake off that impact. The creature lurched sideways, stumbling, almost falling, with a fresh shriek of pain. Walsharno snapped back around to face it, and it was slower as it gathered itself this time. It hesitated, crouching down, hissing and bubbling in mingled fury and anguish. Walsharno started towards it, and it actually backed away, sidling sideways, head cocked, watching its enemies.

"Something's wrong."

Bahzell and Walsharno were too deeply fused for the hradani to be positive which of them that thought came from, yet he knew it was accurate. He'd fought Sharnâ 's demons before, and none of them had ever reacted the way this one was. He could literally feel its hatred, its need to attack, despite the agonizing wounds he and Walsharno had already inflicted, but still it continued to back away, instead. It shouldn't have done that. Painful as its injuries might be, they were far from incapacitating and their torment only fueled the demon's blazing rage and hatred. So why —?

And then reality *twisted* suddenly.

"Behind us!"

This time there was no doubt; the screamed mental warning came from Walsharno, not Bahzell, as the carefully prepared spell opened behind them. For all their experience, neither champion had been

watching for Carnadosa and her worshipers. Their attention had been focused entirely on *Sharnā* and the menace of the demon directly in front of them, and the perfectly timed execution of the spell took them totally by surprise. The solid earth fell away as Tremala and Rethak opened a gate between the heart of Cherdahn's buried temple and the hillside directly behind Walsharno and Bahzell. A noisome stench erupted from the opening, and a hurricane of fresh fangs, wings, and claws came with it as *thesecond* demon hurled itself straight at their backs.

XI

"Angle to the right, Jack," Ken Houghton suggested as the LAV shoved its way through the tangled underbrush. "The slope's more gradual. Looks like there's probably a runoff channel from that range of hills. See the big boulder at about two o'clock?"

"Yeah. For what it's worth," Mashita grunted.

"It's at the left edge of the channel. See?"

"Oh, *Isee* it all right, Boss. I just don't know if I can get this *bitchup* it!"

"Well, that's where Wencit says we need to go, and I know you always perform best under pressure," Houghton said encouragingly.

"Gee, thanks! Why not just hold a gun to my head and be done with it?"

Houghton chuckled, yet the truth was that Jack had a point. There were many things Gunnery Sergeant Houghton loved about the LAV-25, but for all that, Tough Mama had her drawbacks. For one thing, no wheeled vehicle could turn as sharply as a fully tracked one, like the Army's Bradley. A Brad could literally pivot in place, turning through three-hundred-sixty degrees in its own length, while any wheeled vehicle had to continue to move forward through its turning circle. For another thing, although he didn't expect that to be a factor under current circumstances, a LAV's wheel wells couldn't be as well armored as the rest of the vehicle, which made them vulnerable targets for hostile fire. But what had Mashita worried at the moment—and Houghton as well, whether he wanted to admit it or not—was that the LAV's higher center of gravity simply made it less stable. Which, given the nature of the terrain through which Mashita had been picking his way for the last forty-five minutes or so, wasn't exactly an academic consideration.

"Do *wereally* have to go up there, Wencit?" he asked quietly—or, at least, as quietly as the noise of Tough Mama's passage allowed.

"Yes, and as quickly as we can." For the first time, the wild wizard actually sounded tense, almost brusque, and Houghton felt his own nerves tighten in response.

"Quickly and sneakily don't exactly go together very well," he pointed out. Then he snorted in amusement at his own words. A LAV was far quieter than a tracked vehicle. That, unfortunately, was much the same as saying that a chainsaw was quieter than a thunderstorm. Both statements were factually correct, but that didn't exactly make the chainsaw hard to hear when someone decided to cut down a three-foot oak in your front yard on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

"At the moment speed is more important than sneakiness," Wencit replied. "Besides," he looked back at Houghton, and despite his tension, there was more than a hint of a smile in his voice, "you might be surprised at just how quiet your vehicle is being at the moment."

"*Quiet?*" Houghton couldn't keep the skepticism out of his own voice, and Wencit chuckled.

"Remember what I said about glammers, Gunnery Sergeant Houghton. They don't work just against spells, you know."

Houghton turned to look at him for several seconds while Mashita threw Tough Mama into full eight-wheel drive and began—noisily—working his way up the drainage chute Houghton had spotted for him. Then the Marine laughed out loud.

"Wencit, if you can make *this* thing 'quiet,' then I really am ready to believe in magic!"

"That's good, Gunnery Sergeant. Because unless I miss my guess, you're about to see quite a lot of it. In fact, I'd suggest that you get your main weapon ready. We're going to need it shortly."

Houghton's eyes sharpened and his nostrils flared. Then he grunted to himself.

"Get your ass buttoned up, Jack!" he said over the commo link. "Wencit says we're about to run into the bad guys."

"*Damnit!* Why does *this* always happen in the middle of terrain like fucking this?!"

Mashita's intense frustration was obvious. Not surprisingly, given how limited a LAV's driver's buttoned-up field of view was. But he dropped his seat down and slammed his overhead hatch, sealing himself in his small compartment beside the thundering diesel Wencit had just assured Houghton no one else could hear. Wencit, on the other hand, stayed where he was, peering into the dark with those glowing eyes.

"Time to get your head down, Wencit," Houghton said sharply.

"I'm afraid not," the wizard replied. "Believe me," he continued before Houghton could explain that Tough Mama was neither a democracy nor a debating society, "nothing would please me more than to do just that. Unfortunately, I not only need to see what's going on; I may also need to be able to cast spells, and I can't do that with your vehicle's armor between me and the spell's object."

Houghton had opened his mouth. Now he closed it with a snap. He didn't like it one little bit, and a part of him wondered if Wencit wasn't . . . shading the truth just a bit in order to keep his head up. But Wencit was the wizard around here, and Houghton had no choice but to accept that the old man knew what he was talking about.

Houghton, on the other hand, had no choice. He stripped off his NVG goggles and dropped down into the gunner's seat, with the big twenty-five-millimeter cannon and coax machine gun at his left elbow. Both weapons were in Condition One, and had been for hours. High explosive had been selected for the Bushmaster, the ghost round had been cycled into the chamber, the manual safety was set on "FIRE," and only the electric safety was engaged. The machine gun's cover assembly was closed, the bolt was to the rear, and—like the cannon—the manual safety was on "FIRE" and the electric safety was engaged. Now he pressed his face the DIM-36TH sight's eye shield.

He'd just settled into position when he heard Wencit's voice over his earphones.

"To your right, Gunnery Sergeant! *To your right!* "

Houghton squeezed the gunner's joystick and sent the turret tracking smoothly to the right just as Tough Mama topped out on a flat bench about half way up the current hillside. For a few moments he saw very little. Then that changed abruptly, and his eyes widened in sheer, stunned disbelief.

Despite all that had happened to him in the last ten or twelve hours, nothing could have prepared him for this. The sight was configured for thermal mode, which normally left a great deal to be desired where details were concerned, but this nightmare creature's body stood out as brightly as any thermal signature Houghton had ever seen. Its body temperature must have been almost as high as Tough Mama's engine block, yet that scarcely even registered beside its impossible size and the obscene fusion of wings, claws, pincers, mandibles, and horns. The thing had to be at least forty or fifty feet long, with a squat, armored body suspended from spider-like legs that arched a good ten feet above its back. Bat-wings—two pairs of them, not just one—beat at the night as its serpentine head darted forward, striking at its intended prey.

It took a stunned, detached corner of his mind a moment or two to realize just how big the mounted man and his horse in front of the monster actually were. Compared to their horrifying opponent, they looked like pygmies, yet that detached corner realized that the horse was bigger than any Clydesdale or Percheron he'd ever seen.

Not that it should have mattered in the least. Huge as the horse might be, the monster's head alone must have been better than half its size.

The cavalryman and his horse were both wrapped in some sort of heat-shimmering cocoon. It obviously wasn't as ferociously hot as the creature they faced, yet in some odd way, it was actually brighter. Or clearer. More . . . concentrated, perhaps. Houghton's spinning thoughts bounced off of the surface of whatever concept they were trying to form, and then he realized the man on that horse's back was armed with an honest-to-Gods *sword*. The biggest damned sword Houghton had ever imagined, and one that glared with its own savage corona, but still only as sword.

Who the fuck does he think he is? *Saint George?*

The thought flicked through the Marine's brain between one heartbeat and the next, and then the lunatic charged.

Houghton's jaw dropped as that glittering sword lashed out at the mounted man's stupendous foe. The sudden eruption of light and power as it slammed into the monster's wing almost blanked the thermal image completely. The glaring steel sheered through the creature's unnatural flesh like an axe, lopping off the wing's innermost knuckle, and then the huge horse pivoted on its forefeet with preposterous precision and lashed out with its rear hooves.

The monster staggered, almost falling, then whipped around to face its puny opponents with a squall of rage, pain, and fury that half-deafened Houghton inside Tough Mama's turret.

As that unearthly, terrifying sound went through him, the Marine shook his head, like a prizefighter who'd taken one too many punches to the chin, and a sudden bolt of anger ripped through him. Anger directed at himself, at his own inaction. The sheer, appalling impossibility of what he was seeing had frozen him, turned him into the spectator, and his lips drew back from his teeth as he twisted the joystick and slewed Tough Mama's cannon towards the monster . . . just in time to find the cavalryman directly between him and it.

"Driver, halt!" he barked. "Target, three o'clock!"

Technically, he should have identified what the target *was*, as well. Unfortunately, he didn't have the least damned idea what to call the thing.

"*Holy shit!*" Mashita had obviously caught at least a glimpse of what Houghton was seeing through his own night vision viewer. His reaction to it wasn't exactly out of the training manual, but he responded instantly to Houghton's command, and the LAV stopped. Unlike the Bradley, the LAV's cannon wasn't stabilized to permit it to be accurately fired on the move, and Houghton's sight picture steadied as Tough Mama stopped moving. The range was under two hundred meters, perfect for a battlesight engagement. In fact, there was no way Houghton could possibly miss a target that size from this close.

Now if the idiot on the horse would only get out of the —

Houghton's belly twisted with sudden nausea. It was almost like the sensation he'd experienced when Wencit snatched the LAV into this preposterous universe, yet it was different, as well. With Wencit's spell, there'd been that sense of falling even as Tough Mama had been motionless underfoot. This time, nothing around Houghton seemed to be moving, and yet it was as if two powerful hands had gripped his stomach and twisted in opposite directions. It was in enormous sense of *wrongness*, and then, impossibly (although his punch-drunk brain was getting rather tired of that particular label), a huge sinkhole appeared, with absolutely no warning, and a *second* monster swarmed up out of it . . . directly behind the mounted man.

XII

Walsharno's cry of warning snapped Bahzell's head around, turning it towards the sudden threat from behind them.

There was no time for thought. No time to analyze what had happened. There was barely time for the hradani to begin to curse his own complacency. To realize that *this* time, he and Walsharno had blundered straight into the Dark's carefully crafted trap.

That this time, they were going to die.

He twisted in the saddle, fighting to get far enough around to land at least one blow, and then something thundered in the night.

The turret twitched slightly to the left.

The glowing swordsman and his horse might be between Houghton and the first monster, but the Marine had a perfect firing angle at the second one, and a corner of his mind noted that the horseman was well clear of his line of fire. The sight's reticle dropped onto the huge creature's side, between the third and fourth legs on its right side, and Ken Houghton's hand squeezed.

Tough Mama's 25-millimeter cannon's muzzle flash shredded the night as a three-shot burst of M792 HEI-T shrieked downrange, at over thirty six hundred feet per second. The tracer rounds etched fiery trails across the horror-haunted darkness, then slammed into their target. Each round carried thirty-two grams of a high explosive mix which normally projected steel fragments and incendiary filler over a five-meter radius when they detonated, and the monster squalled as they exploded in stroboscopic fury.

It squalled . . . but it also whipped around towards Tough Mama. The detonating shells had punched relatively tiny holes through its spiny carapace before they exploded, then blown washtub-sized openings through it as they detonated inside it and blasted wounds into the unnatural flesh and muscle beneath. Ichor and head-sized gobbets of meat burst from its side and streamed down its flank, but its hell-spawned armor was incredibly tough. The shells might have punched holes in it, might have inflicted enormous collateral destruction under the armor, but blasting through it had slowed them, kept them from punching deep into their target's flesh before they detonated. It was obvious that none of the damage had gotten deep enough to reach its vital organs . . . assuming that it had any! Instead of going down, it shrieked in furious challenge, and hurled itself directly towards the source of a sudden pain.

Kenneth Houghton was a qualified master gunner. He knew exactly what he'd just hit that creature with, and the rational part of his brain couldn't believe what he was seeing. Big as it was, *it had* to have gone down after taking three hits almost exactly center of mass! He didn't care *what* it was. The kinetic transfer alone ought to have made sure of *that*, never mind the explosion, the incendiary effect, or the shell splinters. And even if it hadn't gone down the damned thing was almost as big as a frigging blue whale! It had to wait at least fifty or sixty tons, and *nothing* that size could possibly move that fast! Especially not something covered with armor tough enough to stand up to a Bushmaster even for a heartbeat!

Fortunately, perhaps, his brain's refusal to accept his eyes' input had no appreciable effect on his bone-deep reflexes.

His thumb punched the button, shifting instantly from high explosive to armor-piercing, and he squeezed the trigger again. The M919 discarding sabot round left the muzzle with almost a third again the velocity of the high explosive round, and its fin-stabilized "long-rod" penetrator of depleted uranium could penetrate virtually all light armored vehicles and even some main battle tanks. It could also penetrate over sixteen inches of reinforced concrete or an earthen bunker wall *three feet* thick, which had made it increasingly popular in urban fighting, and this time Houghton held the trigger down longer. Twelve rounds smashed into his target, and if the demon's carapace had been tough enough to limit the high explosive rounds' effect, the armor-piercing was another story.

The creature staggered, shrieking, flailing its wings as the uranium lightning bolts drilled through its armor—and the flesh inside it—like fiery awls. It half-rose as the impacts hammered into it, but that only exposed its chest, and Houghton sent another six-shot burst hammering into the new target. The entry wounds were small; the *exit* wounds were enormous, and ichor exploded across the hillside. Grass hissed and shriveled under the acid spray, and the monster's shrieks of rage turned into bubbling wails of agony.

This time, *it did* go down, but even then, it wasn't finished. Its clawed feet scrabbled at the ground with unnatural vitality, heaving it back up, and a disbelieving Houghton put *a fourth* burst into the thing.

Bahzell and Walsharno didn't have time to worry about where the *thing* attacking the second demon had come from, because the one they'd already wounded had been waiting only for its companion's attack before coming at them again. Even as the second demon turned away, the first one came charging in again.

But it had been just as surprised as Bahzell and Walsharno. It hesitated for just an instant, as astonished by the LAV's abrupt appearance out of the heart of Wencit's glamour as the two champions had been when the spell activated behind them, and that gave them just long enough to return their attention *to it*.

It hurled itself forward, screaming an earsplitting war cry of pure, distilled rage, and Bahzell stood in the stirrups as Walsharno waited, waited, *waited* to the very last instant. The demon's fangs glistened in the blue corona of Tomanâk's light. Bahzell could see clear down the huge, wet, slimy gullet, smell the stench of its fetid breath, and still Walsharno waited. He waited until it was obviously too late . . . then sprang aside with the incredible swiftness possible only for a courser.

The demon's squall of fury changed pitch. It sounded almost querulous, as if the sudden disappearance of the prey it had been certain was as good as in its fangs was cheating somehow. But if that was the way it felt, it didn't have long to savor its disappointment.

"*Tomanâk!*"

The striking head, overshot its dodging target. The demon was already swinging around, arching its sinuous neck to come back in a second, sideways strike, as Bahzell brought his blue-flaming sword down in a two-hand blow driven by the full, enormous strength of his shoulders and back and all the power of his Rage.

The sword landed with the sharp, clear "CRACK!" of an ancient oak, shattering in a vise of winter ice. But this crack was loud enough to be heard even by ears stunned by the LAV's cannon fire, even through the deafening, enraged shriek of the remaining demon. Blue light glared like striking lightning, flashing back from the point of impact with a brilliance that etched the hillside, the trees, every individual blade of grass, with stark, blinding clarity, and the glittering steel sheared two-thirds of the way through a neck thicker than most men's height. Ichor spurted, shattered splinters of scale flew, and the demon's bellow died in mid-shriek, with the appalling suddenness of a slamming door.

The stupendous body slammed to the ground. Momentum carried it forward in a sliding, slithering sprawl, and Walsharno stumbled, almost falling, as the very tip of one dying wing flailed out and crashed into his shoulder. Somehow, the courser held his feet, spinning to face the hole from which the second demon had emerged . . . just as a third and fourth monster erupted from it.

Houghton's jaw did its very best to drop as that blinding blue sword came crashing down. It had taken twenty-plus direct hits from Tough Mama's Bushmaster to put down *Houghton's* target, and this Bahzell of Wencit's had taken one out with a *singlesword stroke*?

But he didn't have a great deal of time to think about the impossibility of what he'd just seen, because more of the hideous creatures were swarming out of the same opening. One of them wheeled, charging back at Bahzell and his horse; the other hurled itself directly at the LAV . . . and *a fourth* came squirming out of the ground behind it like a maggot, with its mad, glaring eyes already fixed on Tough Mama.

Houghton hoped like hell that Wencit's friend was going to be able to handle the one headed away from the LAV, because *he* damned well had his hands full with the two coming his way.

The only good point—if anything about this could be called "good"—was that he didn't even have to traverse. The closer of the two monsters came straight for him, almost as if it were trying to physically climb inside the cannon's barrel, and he squeezed again. The uranium penetrators stabbed through the night like lethal meteors, and twelve of them punched their deadly way into the demon's scaly chest and then out again through its spiky carapace. The monster shrieked in agony as its legs abruptly collapsed and it hit the hillside in an avalanche of mortally wounded hatred and fury. The LAV quivered as the force of that multi-ton impact was transmitted through the ground, and the dying creature slashed with one

huge, talon-armed forefoot.

The claws sledgehammered into Tough Mama, raking savagely across her front right flank. She bobbed like a dinghy on a stormy sea, and Houghton's helmeted head slammed into the bulkhead-mounted radio behind him as the LAV's right front wheel was ripped completely away. It went flying through the night like a discarded hockey puck, and he heard the unearthly shriek of side armortearing—*tearing*like cloth—as the talons raked over it.

Mashita shouted something over Houghton's helmet earphones, and the gunnery sergeant smelled an incredible hot-metal-and-acid stench as the monster's blood showered across the forward deck and the front of the turret.

He didn't have time to think about the inconceivable strength it had taken to rock the fourteen-ton LAV like a toy. The fourth demon was already lunging across the twitching, spasming body of its dying companion, and Houghton squeezed the trigger again just as the creature brought one foot down on Tough Mama's deck. The LAV seemed to curtsy, sinking downward on its damaged front suspension under that incredible load, and the demon's head darted forward, striking directly at the turret.

The nine-foot cannon's muzzle flamed, spewing penetrators directly into the monster's gaping maw at two hundred rounds per minute, and the top of the demon's skull literally disintegrated as the fin-stabilized darts exploded through its brain. The striking head was driven up and backwards, and the monster's bellows died in a hideous, whistling gurgle. It thundered to earth, falling directly atop its companion, and the momentum of the its charging body rammed into the LAV's glacis with enough force to whiplash Houghton and Mashita's heads painfully on their necks and drive the entire vehicle half its length backward despite its locked wheels.

* * *

Bahzell and Walsharno heard the earsplitting thunder of their mysterious ally's incredible weaponry and the shrieks and bellows of the other two demons, but they dared not let their attention stray from the one coming at them. This one was different from the others. It had even more legs, yet it was marginally smaller and faster, without wings but with two complete sets of long, lobster-like pincers. It was less cautious than the first one had been, too, as if it had decided its best chance lay in sheer speed and ferocity. Unlike the others, it attacked almost silently, saving its breath, and it reared high, keeping its head and neck out of the range of Bahzell's sword as it struck at Walsharno with those man-long pincers.

The courser leapt forward, ducking inside the sweep of the outer pincers, trumpeting his own challenge, and the second set of pincers came slashing at him like knife-sharp shears of horn. Walsharno staggered as a glancing blow opened a long, bleeding gash across his side, but Bahzell twisted at the waist, bringing his sword up in a flashing arc that impacted on the demon's forelimb from beneath. The glittering steel bit deep, half-severing the pincer, and the demon howled, slashing with all three remaining claws.

But Bahzell and Walsharno had gotten too close. They were inside the sweep of the outer pincers, and too close to the monster's chest for it to see them clearly without bringing its horned head into the reach of Bahzell's sword. It struck blindly at them, then crouched as it prepared to spring back and away from its tiny adversaries and regain fighting room.

The two champions had no intention of allowing it to do anything of the sort. Despite his deep, bleeding wound, Walsharno drove straight ahead, and Bahzell leaned forward in the saddle, leaned forward over Walsharno's outstretched neck, riding at the thrust as if his massive, two-handed sword were a Sothôii cavalry saber. The demon couldn't see them . . . and as it crouched, it actually brought its own body

closer to its enemies.

Bahzell's sword punched into the monster's scale-armored, massively muscled chest just at the base of its throat. Scales and flesh hissed, smoking as blue flames licked out from the penetrating steel, consuming the unnatural stuff of the demon's flesh, and its shriek of agony was deafening. It twisted away from the intolerable pain, and as it did, it wrenched sideways on the blade, ripping the wound wider and deeper with its own enormous strength.

"Tomanâk!*Tomanâk!*" Bahzell thundered his war cry, and Walsharno's whistling trumpet counterpointed his deep-throated bellow as smoldering ichor fountained across them in a stinking fan. The hradani's sword yanked free of the ghastly wound as the charging courser swept onward, and he brought it down in an ax blow that slashed the demon's remaining inner claw entirely off.

Walsharno's pounding hooves carried them clear of their monstrous foe as the no-longer-silent demon reared up, hissing and screaming in pain. It writhed, its maimed forelimbs flailing, smoking blood spouting from its wounds, and Bahzell and Walsharno used the distraction of its agony. Walsharno's forehooves dug into the smoldering hillside, plowing deep furrows through its torn and scarred turf as they braked his forward speed, and his rear feet flashed up in a piledriver blow to the demon's shoulder. Despite its size, despite its weight, the monster went down, tumbling onto its side, and Walsharno recovered his balance, leaned back to gather his weight on his hindquarters, then pivoted and brought both *forehooves* hammering down on the side of the creature's neck, just above the gaping wound Bahzell's sword had torn.

The demon flailed madly, throat half-severed and half-crushed. It managed to jerk its head back up, fangs slashing, but it was hurt, weakened, clumsy, and Bahzell leaned aside in Walsharno's saddle. The head darted past him, and that proved just as deadly for this demon as it had for the first one. The five-foot blade came slashing down one final time, trailing streamers and prominences of blue fire, and the demon gave one last coughing, grunting cry as the hammering steel severed its spinal column and sent it crashing to the ground in quivering ruin.

XIII

"Jack!*Jack!*"

"I'm okay, Boss!" Mashita's voice was shaken, but Houghton had never heard a more welcome sound in his life.

"Good." Houghton realized he was still clutching the gunner's joystick in a death grip and made his hand relax. He reengaged the electric safeties on both cannon and machine gun, then took his hand off the joystick and drew a deep breath.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"That's kinda hard to say with a couple hundred tons of dead whatever-the-fuck-those-things-were stacked all over the deck," Mashita replied. "I know the front right suspension's screwed, but I don't know about any of the other axles. And I can't see Jack—you should pardon the expression—with this thing lying across my vision slots. Not to mention my hatch; I'm gonna have to crawl back through the tunnel to get out."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised." Houghton heard a flicker of genuine humor in his own voice and gave himself a shake.

"I take it you're still okay, too, Wencit?"

"Indeed I am, Gunnery Sergeant," Wencit said. "And perhaps you're beginning to understand why I wanted the most powerful ally I could summon," he added dryly.

"From what I could see, your boy Bahzell's pretty bad damned news all by himself," Houghton said.

"Champions of Tomanâk tend to be that way. Speaking of which . . ."

The wizard, Houghton realized abruptly, never had closed the commander's hatch. He'd stayed right where he was, sticking up out of it, even as no less than three demons—and Houghton was certainly prepared to concede the applicability of the term after what had just happened—came charging straight at him. Which meant either that he was an even bigger lunatic than Houghton had thought, or else that he was an even more powerful wizard than he'd suggested. Or, more probably, both.

Now Wencit clambered up to perch on top of the turret, resting one heel nonchalantly on the outstretched forelimb of the final demon.

"So, Bahzell," Houghton heard over his helmet headphones, "fancy meeting you here!"

Bahzell's ears twitched straight up in astonishment at the familiar voice coming to him from the outlandish looking vehicle half buried in dead demons.

"You know, *he can be really irritating when he turns up this way, can't he?*" Walsharno observed.

"Aye, that he can. Still and all, I'm not so very tempted to be complaining about it this evening," Bahzell replied judiciously.

"There were only five of them, you know," Walsharno grumbled.

"Which would have been only about four too many of them, I'm thinking."

"All right, *be that way.*"

"And could you be so very kind, Wencit," Bahzell said, raising his voice but speaking with exquisite courtesy, "as to be explaining to us how it is you've happened along at just this very moment *this time?*"

Walsharno trotted towards the vehicle, just as a second hatch opened in its roof and a stranger in a uniform which looked just as outlandish as the vehicle itself poked his head and shoulders up out of it.

"As to that," Wencit said, "the person you want to be thanking is Gunnery Sergeant Houghton here. He and Private Mashita were kind enough to give me a ride."

"And just how was it you . . . inveigled them into anything as daft as that? Did you ride up to *them* out of a snow flurry in a swamp?"

"I've only used that particular technique once, I'll have you know," Wencit said in dignified tones. "In this case, I simply mentioned to them that I had a friend—two friends, actually—who were about to get

themselves into trouble all over again. Once I'd explained, they decided they didn't have anything better to do tonight."

"Did they now?" Walsharno reached the vehicle and halted. Sitting in the saddle, Bahzell was taller than the ungainly-looking thing, and he reached his right hand towards Houghton.

"I'm thinking as how no one in his right mind would be after volunteering for something like this," he said. "Still and all, it's grateful I am. And impressed."

Bahzell's voice was the deepest one Kenneth Houghton had ever heard. It seemed to roll up from his toenails and then rumble around inside that vast chest of his until it reached critical mass and came spilling out with the power of James Earl Jones on steroids.

That was Houghton's first thought. Then he noticed Bahzell's tufted, fox-like ears, thrusting up through the special openings in his helmet.

Nope, still *not in Kansas, Toto*, he told himself wryly.

"I probably wouldn't have volunteered if I'd really realized what we were getting into," he heard himself saying aloud as he reached out to take the proffered had. "And I imagine I'm even more impressed with you than you are with me." He shook his head. "You may think I'm out of my mind, but *I know* you are! At least *I* had an LAV and not just a sword!"

"Ah, well, as to that, I'd a bit more than 'just a sword' working for me." Bahzell's grin showed white, strong teeth.

"That's true enough," Wencit said. "On the other hand, if you too can tear yourselves away from your mutual admiration society, there are still some rather unpleasant people in the neighborhood."

"Aye, so there are." Bahzell nodded. "In fact, I've the oddest notion, given what's just been happening here, as how those unpleasant folk have been putting themselves to quite an effort so as to invite Walsharno and me to their little get-together. You wouldn't be knowing anything about that, would you, Wencit?"

"I believe I told you—once, at least—that I'm a wizard and wizards are *supposed* to know things."

* * *

"So much for your *demons*!" Garsalt snarled.

"My *demons*?" Cherdahn glared back at the balding wizard.

The priest and his three wizard "allies" sat in luxuriously comfortable chairs around a long, glassy-smooth table of stone. The stone walls were covered with tapestries—less horrifying, thankfully, than the mosaics of the main tunnel, although still gruesome enough to affect most people's appetites—and wall sconces less brilliant than the tunnel's overhead spheres spread gentle illumination through the sumptuously furnished chamber. The dinner dishes had been removed before Bahzell arrived, and they'd been sipping wine and watching the images Garsalt's scrying spells had projected into the head-sized gramerhain crystal hovering in midair above the table with celebratory anticipation. But those images hadn't shown

them what they'd hoped for, and now their wine glasses sat ignored on the table while he and Cherdahn locked fiery eyes with one another.

"The Scorpion's servants did exactly what they were *supposed* to do," Sharnâ's priest half-spat. "And, forgive me if I seem a little confused, but I was under the impression that you knew where Wencit was. Apparently, I was mistaken, wasn't I? And did you simply forget to mention that . . . that . . . *whatever* that thing out there is?"

"Of course not! But if you'd done what —"

"*Enough*, Garsalt!" Tremala snapped, and both men (assuming the term "man" was still applicable to Cherdahn) turned to glare at her, instead of each other.

"No," she continued, once she was certain she had their attention, "the demons didn't succeed. That certainly wasn't Cherdahn's fault, however, Garsalt. Nor was it ours. We opened the portal exactly as planned, and without Wencit's arrival, the Bloody Hand and his horse would both be dead now *and* the demons who'd survived their encounter with him would be waiting for Wencit, when *he* came blundering in too late to save the Bloody Hand. So yes, Cherdahn, we should have told you where he was. Unfortunately, we did. The last time Garsalt and I checked, Wencit was still at least ten leagues from here."

"Then you should have checked more recently," Cherdahn said icily.

"We last checked less than twenty minutes before Bahzell arrived outside your door," Tremala said sweetly.

"That's ridiculous!"

"Yes, it is, isn't it? Unless, of course, he knew exactly what was going on—exactly what we had planned—and built a glamour within a glamour expressly to deceive us."

"That's impossible, Tremala," Rethak objected. She looked at the dark, dapper wizard, whose specialty was the creation of sophisticated glammers, and he shook his head. "He may be Wencit of Rûm, but even so, he couldn't possibly have known. Certainly not long enough ago to set something like *that* up!"

"What's he talking about?" Cherdahn demanded suspiciously.

"The only way Wencit could have deceived us that way would have been to build two glammers," Tremala said. "One of which—the one we knew about—was designed to keep us from locating him at all, or so we thought. And the second of which was intended to deceive us into thinking he was further away than he really was just in case we did manage to relocate him. And, just coincidentally, allowed us to 'know' where he was without letting us actually see him or his surroundings, which meant we didn't know anything about that . . . vehicle he brought with him."

She paused for a moment, one eyebrow arched, until Cherdahn nodded impatiently for her to go on.

"Unfortunately, there are two problems with that possibility. First, we—or, rather, certain . . . colleagues of ours—have been monitoring him for weeks. We knew, or thought we did, exactly when he became aware of our plans, because that was when his glamour of concealment went up in the first place. At which point, exactly as we expected, we lost track of him for quite a while. But not even Wencit of Rûm could have built two nested glammers without the ones watching him realizing what he was doing, and

nested glamours have to be put together very carefully. The *inner* glamour has to be erected first, Cherdahn, and there's no question at all but that the glamour we finally managed to pierce is the original, outer one we saw go up in the first place."

"Then, obviously, you're mistaken about what he did."

"Do *I* tell *you* how to summon the Scorpion's Servants?" Tremala demanded, her lip curling scornfully. "I'm not mistaken about what he did, but it's just become abundantly clear that we've all been mistaken about *when* he did it. That's the second problem I mentioned. It's the order in which the spells are cast, not the order in which they actually activate, which really matters. What Wencit must have done is cast the inner glamour before those colleagues of ours started monitoring him, but constructed it in such a way that it didn't activate—didn't manifest—until after the outer glamour did."

"So you're saying your 'colleagues' were clumsy enough that he realized what they were doing that far ahead of time?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. The fact that they didn't see him doing it means he must have prepared the inner glamour literally weeks, even months ago. And the problem, you see, Cherdahn, is that for him to confuse us as to where he is in relationship to where we're standing right this minute, he had to include this specific location in his spell construct. In other words, he had to know at least approximately where your temple was before he could cast the spell. Which means any warning he got must have come from *your* side."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Of course it is. But it's also what must have happened. Without his knowing this location so that he could anchor the second glamour to it, every time we checked his location through the chink he 'accidentally' left in his outer glamour, we'd have gotten a different distance reading—a fixed distance from the observer. The *same* fixed distance, whether it was one of us, right here, or one of our colleagues elsewhere. And the fact that we could have compared our distance readings would inevitably have shown us what was happening, since he couldn't actually be the same distance from *both* of us. The only way to avoid that problem for a moving glamour is to anchor it to a specific, previously known and located physical location. In other words, he needed to index the spell *hereto* be certain that the distances we got were consistent."

"But there's no way he could have done that," Cherdahn insisted. "He may be a wild wizard, but my Master is *agod*. No wizard could penetrate His concealment. Not, at least, without our knowing he'd done it. No, Tremala, the only way he could have come to this location was following you, exactly the way he was supposed to. Although," Cherdahn showed his sharp teeth, "he wasn't supposed to be here just yet, was he?"

"No, but —"

"Excuse me," Rethak broke in, his voice sharp. Both of them looked at him, and he grimaced. "Does it really matter how he and that *thing* out there managed to get here without our realizing how close he was? He's here now, he's managed to rescue the Bloody Hand, and the two of them are about to decide what to do about *us*. Don't you think we might do better to be worrying about that than arguing over whose security measures were at fault?"

Tremala and Cherdahn glowered at him for perhaps three heartbeats. Then the sorceress inhaled sharply.

"He's right, you know," she told Cherdahn. "Don't forget, this is Wencit of Rûm we're dealing with. The gods only know what he's capable of, or how he may have done what he's done. But what matters right now is that he and the Bloody Hand are here, and your Servants are all destroyed."

"No, they aren't," Cherdahn said grimly. "As a matter of fact, the most powerful of the Master's Greater Servants is still within."

"It is?" Tremala's eyes brightened, but Cherdahn barked a harsh laugh.

"Indeed it is. Unfortunately, it's a true *Greater* Servant. It's far more powerful than the ones which have been destroyed, but it can be bound only once, and only for a limited time. To send it after Bahzell will take some time. The sacrifice must be performed properly, without dangerous haste, or the Servant will turn on us, instead of the Bloody Hand and Wencit."

"If it's more powerful, why wasn't it used in the first place?"

Cherdahn turned towards Garsalt quickly, but relaxed—at least a little—when he realized the wizard's question was a genuine one, and not simply a thinly veiled criticism.

"As I said, it can be bound only for a limited time. For now, the Scorpion's will holds it pent, but once that will is relaxed to allow us to command it, the period in which any mortal could hope to control it will be brief. We dared not bind it to our service until we knew when Bahzell would arrive. And by the time we knew that, we also 'knew,' thanks to the reports from your scrying spells, that Wencit was far behind him. The five Servants we already possessed, employed as we'd already planned, would have been more than sufficient to deal with the Bloody Hand—had Wencit and that other thing not intervened—and we would still have retained the Greater Servant had it proved necessary to use it to deal with Wencit."

"Fair enough," Tremala said. "But the question now is how long the sacrifice will take?"

"No less than half an hour, and possibly longer," Cherdahn said. "We dare not rush the death, or the binding may not take. And each Greater Servant is different. It may take somewhat longer to generate sufficient pain to satisfy this one's need."

"So we need to keep Wencit and the Bloody Hand busy for at least half an hour."

"You say that like you think it will be easy, Tremala," Rethak objected. "That's *Wencit of Rûm* out there."

"Yes, it is. And I know exactly what his record is, Rethak. But do you have a better suggestion?"

"But —"

"I'm not going back to Kontovar to tell Her I decided to run away rather than face him," the sorceress said flatly. "Wencit's combat magic can only kill us, you know."

Rethak's jaw worked for a moment. Then he jerked a nod.

"In that case," Tremala said, "let's go make our visitors welcome."

Trayn Aldarfro's eyes opened in the Stygian darkness of his tiny cell.

It didn't make any difference, of course, so he closed them again, wishing he could close all of his other senses as readily. His cramped kennel lay deep in the bowels of the hillside violated by Sharnâ's temple, and he could sense the mental auras of dozens of other captives all about him. Most were obviously children; all were starkly terrified.

Someone was sobbing in despair and horror. Someone else—someone whose ordeal had pushed him over the edge of sanity—was talking to himself, or perhaps calling to a son or daughter he knew he would never see again. His long, rambling sentences were interspersed with bouts of screaming laughter, or howls of rage, and someone else was pleading with him to be quiet, to stop, even though the person behind *that* voice had to know her pleas were futile. And layered throughout those sounds, counterpointing all of them, were the moans and whimpers of children trapped in a waking nightmare and the handful of adults seeking uselessly to comfort them.

The despair and hopelessness crushing down upon Trayn in that darkness had driven him to the point of mindlessness. Driven him to the very brink of a mage's final retreat into the mental shutdown which would lead inevitably to the body's death, as well. Yet even there, in that black pit of horror, the training which made him what he was—and some inner spark, whatever it was that made him *who* he was—had refused to allow him to escape. Had demanded that he stay, do what he could if even the tiniest opportunity should present itself. He'd come to accept that escape was as impossible as Tremala had suggested, but even as he'd accepted that, a grim, focused determination to strike back at least once before the end had filled the innermost recesses of his soul.

Now, though, he sensed something even worse. Sensed the stirring of an even greater malevolence, an even greater evil. He sat up, the chains on his ankles clanking, and his face went bleak and hard in the blackness as he heard something else—heard the voice of a young woman, sobbing, pleading, fighting as she was dragged from *her* tiny cell. She couldn't possibly have sensed what he had, yet she seemed to know anyway.

Trayn could hear her, feel her, as she was dragged down the corridor outside the closed door of his own cell, and he knew where she was bound. He knew what sort of death awaited a sacrifice to Sharnâ, and he knew what the unspeakable appetite behind the malevolence he'd sensed wanted from her. And he knew no one could possibly save her from it.

His eyes burned with that knowledge. Then his jaw clenched, and he bent forward, pressing his hands to his temples, summoning all the power within him and focusing it through the training he had already received. He reached out, reached through that darkness and stone, until his questing mental fingers touched the surface of the doomed young woman's mind.

She was even younger than he'd thought, not yet eighteen, he judged. And in that moment when their minds touched, he knew she had already seen the deaths of her parents, her brothers, a sister. Knew she understood precisely what was about to happen to her, as well, and felt her hopeless terror beating like the wings of a dying bird against the iron bars of the inescapable cage about her.

She sensed him, too, though not as clearly as he sensed her, and he held out his mental hand to her. He took *her* hand in his, clasping it, offering the only comfort he could, and felt her grip close with desperate strength and gratitude upon his. There were no words between them. Trayn's major talent was not telepathy, and she had no mage talent at all. Yet if there were no words, there *was* a promise, and Trayn went with her as she was dragged down that passageway of dark stone towards the agonizing death awaiting her.

XIV

"So let me get this straight," Houghton said. "The two of you—the three, of you, I mean —" he corrected himself, nodding at the huge horse he'd been informed was actually something called a courser and also a champion of Tomanâk, "plan to *goinside* that thing, right?"

"Aye, and so we do," Bahzell agreed.

There was something about that earthquake-deep voice of his which made anything he suggested sound reasonable, Houghton reflected. However insane it might actually be.

"And there may be more of these things," the gunnery sergeant jerked his head in a sideways nod at the hideous, mangled bodies draped in front of—and across—the front end of his LAV, "waiting for you in there?"

"As to that, I'm thinking there's at least one more," Bahzell said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "I'm after feeling something a bit . . . odd about this one, though."

"*'Odd'?*" Houghton snorted. "So all of this —" he waved both arms at the abattoir hillside "*—wasn't* ?*öodd*" for you people?"

"Actually," Wencit replied with a slight smile, "it's not very far out of the ordinary for a champion of Tomanâk."

"As to that," Bahzell gave the wild wizard a quelling look, then turned back to Houghton, "don't you be listening to him, Ken Houghton. It's dead I'd be, and Walsharno with me, if not for you. And its thankful we both are, as well. Still and all, we've some unfinished business down that hole yonder."

"What sort of business?"

Houghton knew, the instant he opened his mouth, that he shouldn't have asked the question.

"The 'raiders' Walsharno and I have been after following—aye, and the ones Wencit's been after chasing with you—are inside there, and they've at least one entire village's children, not to mention dozens of other folk, with them."

"And you're going in after them," Houghton said flatly.

"Aye." Bahzell's deep, rumbling voice was just as flat, just as hard. "I've no choice, you see. I've already said there's after being at least one more of these beauties down yonder, and so there is. And the only way Demon Breath's church can be after controlling such is by feeding them."

He didn't have to explain what he meant, and Houghton's belly knotted at the implications. Implications which, he knew, he should have already recognized for himself.

"And just how many people—how many soldiers—are they going to have in there with them?" he asked.

"Somewhere in excess of a hundred armsmen," Wencit said. "I can't be positive exactly how many, but that's a minimum number. And then there are at least three wizards, possibly more. Plus the demon, of course."

"Aye," Bahzell agreed. "Still and all, Wencit, they've not bound the demon yet. That's going to be taking them more than a minute or two, I'm thinking. So if it happened we could get in there quick enough, it might just be as we could keep them from ever binding it."

"Somehow," Houghton sighed, "I just knew you were going to say that." He shook his head, then looked at Mashita with a crooked grin. "What d'you say, Jack?"

It was clear Walsharno didn't think very much of his rider's plans.

Houghton watched Bahzell and the huge stallion standing literally nose-to-nose. The "hradani" (as Wencit had told him Bahzell's branch of the "Races of Man" was known) didn't seem quite so mountainous from a distance, especially when compared to the courser, and Houghton decided he wouldn't have wanted to have anything Walsharno's size as angry with him as the courser stallion obviously was. The gunnery sergeant and Mashita had looked on in amazement as Bahzell healed the bleeding gash down Walsharno's flank and then watched the courser brush his velvet nose affectionately across the hradani's chest afterward. Now, however, Walsharno stamped one dinner-plate-sized rear hoof angrily. A ring of blue fire, like a flash of igniting lighter fluid, swept outward from the point at which that huge hoof struck the ground, and Walsharno's black tail switched furiously, more like some irate tiger's than that of any "horse" Houghton had ever seen.

"You won't be fitting, if that tunnel's after closing down," Bahzell said in a voice which mingled sternness, reason, frustration, and at least a little anger of its own. "Aye, and, come to that, who's to be watching our backs if you're inside there, too?"

He folded his arms emphatically and paused, as if listening to a voice only he could hear, then shook his head.

"No," he said. Again, his fox-like-ears cocked as if listening. "I'm not liking it a bit more than you," he said then, his voice marginally gentler, "and well you know it. But we've no time at all, at all, to be standing here, arguing."

This stallion glowered at him for another moment, and then his head sagged and his tail drooped. He leaned forward, resting his jaw on the hradani's shoulder, and Bahzell closed his eyes and reached up to caress his companion's ears as he pressed the side of his own head against Walsharno's neck. Then he stood back, gave the stallion a crisp nod, and turned to Wencit, Houghton, and Mashita.

"If it's still minded you are to be going, then we'd best be on our way," he said briskly.

He turned and headed towards the hole in the hillside without another word or a single backward glance, and the others followed.

Wencit had already warned Houghton that Bahzell was considerably more sophisticated than he chose to sound, and the gunnery sergeant had been pleased to discover the wizard was right. Bahzell obviously came from a pre-technical culture—or, at least, one whose technology was very different from that of Houghton's home world—but he clearly understood the nuts and bolts of this sort of operation. His briefing on exactly what he could see inside the hill (which was obviously more than even Wencit could) had been terse and concise, and Houghton had no doubt that it had also been entirely accurate. The hradani was also mentally flexible enough to be more than willing to incorporate Houghton and Mashita's

capabilities into his battle plan. For that matter, he'd proven flexible enough to let Houghton *explain* how best to incorporate those capabilities.

They stopped, standing in the windy night—upwind, thankfully, from the stench of the dead demons—with the gunnery sergeant between Wencit and Bahzell. The hradani looked down at Houghton from his towering height and cocked his head.

"I'm thinking you're the one as knows just how best to be doing this," he said, and Houghton nodded, then glanced at Wencit.

"Ready?" he asked, and the wizard nodded back. "Let's do it, then," the Marine said.

This time, Wencit didn't even nod. He simply raised his right hand and frowned slightly, his eyes fixed on the opening in the hillside which he could see only because Bahzell had told him exactly where to look. Then, without a word from him, witchfire glowed silently into existence in his cupped palm, flowing into it like water emerging from thin air. It floated there, flaring and flickering gently, like the wizard's uncanny eyes, and grew. It seemed to happen slowly, gradually, yet Houghton couldn't have breathed more than twice before it had completely filled Wencit's hand and wrapped the wizard's wrist and forearm in tendrils of flowing light. And then, Wencit's hand flicked forward in an oddly elegant, almost gentle throwing motion.

The ball of witchfire arced through the night and disappeared into what *still* looked to Houghton for all the world like a solid piece of hillside. Nothing at all seemed to happen, but then Wencit made a satisfied sound.

"That was a very good idea, Gunnery Sergeant," he said. "They didn't like it a bit."

"I thought they wouldn't," Houghton replied grimly, and stepped forward.

He'd never found out where Diego Santander had acquired the MM-1 grenade launcher, nor had he asked. Tough Mama's gunner was an inspired scrounger, and for all Houghton knew, Diego had won the damn thing in a card game with one of the SpecOps guys he hung around with. If that were the case, Houghton probably should have seen about getting it back to the unit it actually belonged to, but the gunnery sergeant had been much too happy to see it to worry about any petty concerns where legal ownership was concerned.

The twelve-shot, revolver-style weapon weighed over twelve and a half pounds even empty, but Wencit had pointed out that *all he* really needed was to have both hands free in case they required a spell in a hurry. He'd volunteered to help carry other gear, like extra ammunition and the additional grenades. He'd offered to carry the Marine's rifle, as well, but Houghton hadn't been about to let *that* get that far away from him. Still, the wizard's offer left him free to worry about the launcher without loading himself down like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and he smiled unpleasantly at the thought of what it could do.

The MM-1 might be bulky, but it was tough, reliable, easy to maintain, and offered a quick, substantial weight of firepower that was especially welcome to vehicle crews who might find themselves compelled to ditch under it less than ideal circumstances. (Which, in Houghton's opinion, was a perfect description of his current situation.) True, it used the older, low-velocity forty-millimeter grenades, not the newer versions designed for weapons like the Mk 19 rapid-fire grenade launcher. Still, the fragmentation/shaped charge M443 grenades loaded into half its chambers had a casualty radius of over fifteen feet. The other six chambers were loaded with the technically obsolete M576E1 "multi-projectile" grenade, which was effectively an old-fashioned shrapnel round packed with twenty balls, that was even

more lethal, in many respects.

Now Houghton stepped across the threshold into the tunnel where Wencit's spell had just extinguished the overhead lights, plunging everything into total darkness. He'd hoped the wizard might be able to do something of the sort, and his lips peeled back from his teeth in a snarl of satisfaction as the infrared illuminator of his NVG flooded the scene before him with light the unaided eye simply couldn't see. Houghton and Mashita each had their own NVG; Santander had left his aboard Tough Mama, and Houghton had given Bahzell a quick, rough and ready briefing before he handed the gunner's gear over to the hradani. He'd been more than a little surprised by how quickly Bahzell had picked up on what he was saying. In fact, he'd suspected for a few moments that Bahzell hadn't understood at all and simply didn't want to admit it, until Bahzell had repeated his instructions perfectly—almost word for word.

Wencit's right—the big guy ain't no slouch, a corner of Houghton's brain reflected as he raised the launcher. Its maximum range was well over three hundred meters, but he wasn't going to need anywhere near that much to reach the confused sprawl of bow and crossbow-equipped armsmen who'd just been plunged into darkness. The green-and-gray imagery was as familiar to Houghton as the normal colors of daylight, and he watched pitilessly as at least half a dozen of those armsmen dropped their weapons and fumbled with torches, trying frantically to get them lit.

Not going to have time for that, boys, he thought grimly, and squeezed the trigger.

The launcher coughed and sent the first grenade downrange. It landed directly in the center of a knot of armsmen and the M550 fuse detonated the forty-five-gram bursting charge. The explosion lit the tunnel like a lightning flash, and the sound of the detonation in such a confined space was like a pair of fists, slamming down across both ears. For one brief moment, that was all anyone could hear; then the shrieks of pain, mingled with terrified confusion, began just as Houghton tracked his aiming point to the right and squeezed again. The self-cocking cylinder rotated, the second grenade went sizzling downrange, and fresh screams answered.

None of those armsmen had anticipated anything like it. Even those who could see the muzzle flash of the launcher had no clue what it was, and Houghton moved after each shot, changing position just in case any of those bows or crossbows returned fire.

Not that there was going to be very much time for them to do that; it took him less than twenty seconds to fire all twelve grenades.

"What in Phrobus' name is that?" the captain of Tremala's armsmen demanded.

He stood at Garsalt's shoulder, staring in shocked disbelief into the depths of the wizard's personal gramerhain. The fist-sized lump of water-clear crystal should have shown a brightly illuminated entry tunnel where forty picked men were waiting, ready to unleash a torrent of arrows and crossbow quarrels as their opponents crossed the threshold and stood blinking stupidly, stunned eyes bat-blind in the unexpected brilliance. But there *was* no brilliance. Or, rather, not *their* brilliance.

Garsalt was even more stunned, in many ways, than the captain beside him. Scrying was Garsalt's specialty. Unlike many wizards, he could actually perceive spells and their natures when he captured their caster in his gramerhain. Which meant he knew that those blinding flashes of light ripping through the darkness like trapped lightning were totally non-arcanic in nature.

Which, of course, was impossible.

"I don't know what it is," he grated, in answer to the captain's question.

"Well, what happened to the light, then?" The armsman sounded accusing, and Garsalt couldn't really blame him.

"Wencit turned it off," the wizard replied.

"How —?"

"I don't *know* how!" Garsalt interrupted. "He shouldn't have been able to do it. *We* didn't create the light-globes; Cherdahn did it with Sharnâ's aid when he built the temple, and he didn't use wizardry to do it. Even Wencit should have needed at least several minutes to figure out how to turn *god-lights* off, unless"

Garsalt's voice trailed off as he thought furiously. The vicious spits of light in his gramerhain continued, mercilessly cutting down the armsmen who had expected to be the ones doing any ambushing, and the wizard swore viciously in sudden understanding.

"He didn't turn them *off* at all!" he snapped. "He simply used a spell of his own to trap the light above it. The old bastard duplicated the effect of the spell Cherdahn used to keep the light from showing through the archway and projected it between the globes and the rest of the tunnel!"

"But to do that —"

"To do that he had to know the tunnel's exact dimensions before he cast the spell." Sweat beaded Garsalt's forehead, and he shook his head fiercely. "He *had* to know them, or else there'd've been holes in his barrier, places for light to leak through, at least until he reconfigured it. But he couldn't know! Even if he'd somehow been able to see through Cherdahn's barrier, he'd still have had to be able to see through Rethak's glamour, and not even Wencit could have done that without Rethak knowing it!"

"Well whether it's possible or not, he seems to've managed it!" the captain snarled.

"I know that, idiot!" Garsalt stared down into the gramerhain's crystalline depths as one final explosion flashed within it. Unlike the armsmen trapped in the sudden darkness, Garsalt's scrying spell needed no light to see what had happened.

"They're all down," he said flatly. "Two or three of them managed to run away—all the rest are dead or wounded."

"*Phrobus!*" the captain muttered in disbelief. No, not disbelief, Garsalt realized. In the *desire* to disbelieve.

"That's almost a quarter of our total manpower—*gone!*" the captain continued, and Garsalt suppressed a need to snarl back at him. The wizard was painfully aware of that minor fact.

"I'm thinking I'd sooner have you on my side than the other, Ken Houghton," Bahzell Bahnakson said, surveying the carnage.

The tangled drifts of bodies were astonishingly clear through Houghton's magical goggles. Many of those bodies lay still and dead, but others were still alive, whimpering or screaming with the pain of their wounds. Their pain sounds were thin and distorted sounding in the fragile silence filling the wake of Houghton's thunderous weapon, and their agonized writhing sent ripples of movement across the heaped bodies.

The hradani surveyed them without sympathy. Honorable foes he could respect, even pity, but men who gave their swords to the service of scum like Carnadosa or Sharnâ were something else. He remembered the village, those shredded bodies piled in the muddy street where they'd died defending their children against the horror these men had chosen to serve, and there was no pity in him.

"Well, yeah," Houghton agreed, standing beside Bahzell and surveying the same scene. "On the other hand, we've only got sixteen more grenades for this thing."

"A man can't be asking for everything," Bahzell said philosophically.

"And why the hell not?" Houghton demanded. The hradani looked down at him, and the Marine shrugged. "All my life, people have been telling me I 'can't have everything.' I'm just wondering why that is."

"Why, now that you've asked, I've no answer at all," Bahzell told him, with a deep chuckle. "I'm thinking I'd best be introducing you to Brandark and letting him explain it to the both of us."

"I'm not sure how practical that's going to be," Wencit put in from behind them. "And, if you'll pardon me for pointing this out, if you're ever going to have another conversation with Brandark, Bahzell, we'd best be moving on, don't you think?"

"Aren't you just the peevish one?" Bahzell replied. "Still and all," he continued before the wizard could fire back, "you've a point."

He stood for a moment, head cocked, as if he were listening for something none of the others could hear, then pointed to the right.

"There's an intersection up ahead there," he said. "The tunnel we're wanting leads to the right."

XV

Trayn Aldarfro's fingernails cut deep, bleeding wounds in the palms of his fisted hands. Sweat covered his face in a thick, solid sheet; breath hissed between his clenched teeth in jagged, explosive spits of air; and every muscle quivered, shuddering with the waves of agony rolling through him.

He could have escaped the torment anytime he chose, which made it even worse in many ways, yet in truth, *he couldn't* choose to. He was a mage, pledged to fight the Dark at whatever cost. And even if he hadn't been bound by his mage's oath, he'd made another promise. A promise to a girl-woman he'd never even seen.

His spined arched, until only his heels and the back of his head touched the stone floor, and an animal pain sound ripped from his throat. He'd never imagined such agony, yet he knew that despite all he could do, what he was experiencing at this moment was only a fraction of what that girl he'd never seen was suffering.

He was with her as she writhed, twisting and jerking against her chains on the gore-encrusted altar. He was with her as the chanting ghouls who worshiped Sharnâ leaned over her with their knives, their pincers, all the unspeakable instruments of torture consecrated to their Dark God. There was no secret of pain, no possible torture, which they did not know. All the agony which could be inflicted upon the human body was theirs to command, and their victim shrieked as they visited it upon her with a cold, methodical calculation worse than any frenzied explosion of homicidal madness.

Trayn would have given his very soul to save that girl from the atrocity being visited upon her, and he couldn't. *Hecouldn't*. His helplessness was a torment deeper than any pain of the flesh, yet he refused to allow it to distract him from the one thing he could do. And so he was with her, sharing her pain, diverting all of it that he could—little though that might have been against such an avalanche of agony. She was scarcely even aware of his presence, now. There was room for *solittle* within the horror which had engulfed her, but still a tiny fragment of her knew he was there. Knew she was not totally alone, even here, even now. And as Trayn bared his teeth in a snarl of agony, still he held the shield he had thrown about her innermost being.

He felt the glowing knot of her life, her soul, like the fluttering of terrified wings against the palm of his hand. Death—and worse than death—was coming for it, and it knew it, yet even as extinction loomed, it blazed ever brighter and more brilliant, focused by the agony inflicted upon her body, consuming itself in her torment. It was that brightness, the final brightness of despair and anguish, that all of this was designed to create. To offer up to the waiting demon until it reached the crucial point and the demon reached out to it. Reached out and took it—consumed its bleeding shreds and sucked the last dim, glowing marrow from its bones as the monstrous evil extinguished not simply the life, but the very soul of its prey.

Trayn twisted, his own sounds those of a tormented animal, but still he held the shield. Still, he muted that brilliant glow. He felt the demon's waiting malevolence, its avid awareness of the feast promised to it, but he refused to yield. He would hold that shield as long as he lived, and until *he* died, the girl's soul would live, whatever happened to her body.

Cherdahn stepped back from the altar for a moment.

His victim's blood had soaked his vestments in a freshly consecrating flood, and his nostrils quivered with the delicious smell of spilt life and agony. He licked the thin blade of his flaying knife, and the taste was sweet, sweet. But even as its dark power flowed into him, he knew something was wrong.

The sacrifice had been perfect. A virgin, strong-minded enough to have retained her sanity even when her entire family had been butchered, yet old enough—and, perhaps even more importantly, imaginative enough—to *appreciate* her own fate, and young and strong enough to last even on Sharnâ's altar. There could not have been a more delectable offering to one of the Scorpion's Greater Servants, and no one in Sharnâ's service was more skilled than Cherdahn in rendering those offerings.

And yet, he couldn't feel the Servant reaching out to the tender delicacy shrieking upon the altar. He knew the agony had been sufficient, the despair deep enough, but still the Servant stood aloof, without so much as touching the sacrifice's soul. That had never happened to Cherdahn before, and uncertainty tried to chip holes in the dark priest's confidence. Was it possible that somehow, in some unknown fashion, Bahzell and Walsharno were responsible? They were champions of Tomanâk. Could they be managing, even from outside the sacred precincts of the sacrificial chamber, to interfere with the ritual? The very

idea was preposterous, yet what else could it be?

He didn't know the answer to those questions, but in the back of his brain a dark worm of fear had begun to grow. In order to bind the Servant, he'd been forced to weaken the bonds Sharnâ's will had fastened upon it when it was entrusted to Cherdahn's keeping. He'd locked additional restraints into place, tied into the life of the sacrifice, holding it until the instant of her death. That was an essential part of any binding, for a Servant had no loyalty. It hated—and desired—all mortal life, and its most fiery hatred was reserved for those who bound it to their service in the first place. It must be held by the constraints of the Scorpion's ritual until the moment in which it consumed the sacrifice's soul and, in that moment, locked the new binding upon it even as the sacrifice's death dissolved all earlier constraints.

There had been instances in which the ritual had been faulty. In which the sacrifice had died before its soul was consumed. When that happened, the consequences could well prove fatal for the Servant's summoner.

But that had never happened *to him*, Cherdahn reminded himself, and it would not happen here, either. *Here* refused to let it happen, and his jaw tightened as he stepped back to the altar and bent to his task once more.

* * *

Rethak of Kontovar no longer looked quite so dapper. Sweat and the stink of fear tended to have that effect.

He pressed his back to the smooth stone of a passageway and cursed the architect who'd designed this complex warren of tunnels and corridors. The temple was at least twice the size it needed to have been, he thought viciously. Its size was no more than an exercise in egoism on Cherdahn's part, and any priest with half a brain would have kept it as small and inconspicuous as he could have, however good its concealment. But, no, not Cherdahn! *He* had to flaunt the power of his deity. Had to prove what a magnificent temple he could provide even here, in a land where the worship of Sharnâ was punishable by death for all concerned.

And even when its sheer size offered any invader too many possible avenues of advance. Rethak and Tremala were wizards—they'd been able to absorb the temple's twisting, twining design from a quick glance at its plan. Which meant they'd instantly recognized that there were at least six possible paths by which Bahzell, Wencit, and their allies might approach the sacrificial chamber. There was no way Bahzell and Wencit could know the temple's actual layout, but Bahzell was a champion of Tomanâk. He needed no diagrams. He could *feel* the concentration of evil he sought, could pick out a path to it with his eyes closed.

Still, even though there were at least half a dozen possibilities, they converged so that each of them passed through one of two narrow bottlenecks before they spread out once more. And because they did, he and Trelma had to defend both bottlenecks if they were to have any hope at all of stopping the invaders..

Which meant that one of them was going to find himself—or herself—face-to-face with Wencit of Rûm with no arcane allies in sight.

So far, no dark wizard in history had survived a meeting like that.

"Rethak!"

The wizard twitched as Garsalt's voice spoke to him out of the darkness. A quick flair of bitter resentment flashed through Rethak at the sound. Much as he despised Garsalt, he envied him in that moment, because Garsalt's specialty meant *he* was safely in the rear, just outside the sacrificial chamber itself, where he could monitor the enemy's approach. Rethak's specialty, on the other hand, lay in the creation of glamours. He was actually marginally better at it than Tremala was, although the sorceress' other strengths outclassed him hugely. And because he was, *he* was stuck out here, waiting for Wencit and hoping the shield of invisibility he was holding over the armsmen with him would prove strong enough to deflect even the wild wizard's uncanny eyes.

"Rethak!" Garsalt's voice repeated, and this time it was louder. He must have increased the volume of the projection from his end, Rethak thought, because he could hear the throat-ripping shrieks of the sacrifice in the background, despite the thick walls and massive door between Garsalt and the chamber.

"*What?*" Rethak snapped back in a harsh whisper.

"They're coming your way, after all," Garsalt's voice said rapidly. "They'll be there in less than five minutes."

"Fiendark fly away with their souls!" Rethak muttered.

"What? I couldn't hear you."

"Never mind," Rethak grated. "Tell Tremala. And tell that worthless piece of Scorpion shit we need his frigging demon *now*!"

Bahzell Bahnakson led the way down the twisting, turning passage.

Houghton wasn't especially happy about that. Having someone armed with what was effectively a hand-to-hand weapon between the place any fresh enemy might appear and the members of the combat team equipped with firearms wasn't normally a formula for tactical success. In this case, however, he'd been forced to admit that sometimes there were exceptions to the rule.

There were no longer advancing through darkness, yet Bahzell appeared to possess something which was almost as big an advantage over his foes as the nightvision gear had been. Houghton didn't pretend to understand how it worked, but the huge hradani seemed to be able to literally smell the other side. Without him, the others would have walked straight into ambushes at least three or four times already, and if Bahzell didn't have a ranged weapon, the tortuous layout of this rat's nest of tunnels didn't exactly give very long lines of sight, anyway. There was blood splashed across Bahzell's green surcoat now, joining the burned spots the demons' ichor had produced, and Houghton had to admit that no opponent who found himself within reach of the hradani's huge sword was likely to be a problem to anyone else ever again.

Still, it offended his sense of the way things were supposed to be.

And crawling around in tunnels fighting demons and wizards *doesn't offend them, Ken?* he thought sardonically. *It's not as if—*

Bahzell stopped abruptly, and Houghton eased up to the hradani's right rear. The current tunnel was no

more than ten feet across, a circular, polished bore of stone which looked almost as if it had been melted out of the hillside, rather than excavated. There was room for Houghton to take up a position which would allow him to engage past Bahzell, and he and the hradani had agreed that his field of fire would be to Bahzell's right if the opportunity arose.

Houghton had expended another thirteen grenades on the way in, and he'd decided, regretfully, to abandon the MM-1. He hoped Santander would forgive him, but with only three grenades left, and given the close confines of these tunnels, he'd decided that his M-16 gave him much better options. The M443 grenade needed to travel a minimum of fourteen meters before the fuse armed, and they hadn't seen very many tunnel stretches that long in the last twenty minutes or so, so the rifle simply made much more sense. The M-16A4 to which the Marines had switched was shorter than the older M-16A2, and more reliable—and accurate—than the slightly shorter M4 carbine version. With the M203 single-shot grenade launcher under the barrel, he could still make use of the remaining three grenades if the opportunity arose, and he had an entire magazine of 5.56-millimeter on tap if it was needed.

Mashita, on the other hand, was bringing up the rear, watching the backdoor as they advanced with the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon. Corporal Johnson's recon section had left aboard Tough Mama when the LAV decided to go universe-hopping. The light machine gun fired the same round as the M-16, but Mashita had a plastic box with two hundred rounds clipped under the SAW's receiver, and four hundred more rounds clipped to his harness, while Wencit carried another four hundred. The weapon was notoriously inaccurate if someone tried to "John Wayne" it, firing freehand, but fired from its bipod in a prone position, it could lay down a devastating curtain of fire. Given the body armor their opponents were wearing—not to mention the toughness of creatures like the demons they'd already faced—Houghton was happy that both Mashita's weapon and his own were loaded with the black-tipped M995 armor piercing round. Despite its diminutive size, the tungsten-cored round was capable of penetrating even light armored vehicles, and it had become the round of choice for "reconnaissance by fire," given its ability to penetrate concealing structures, as well, not to mention its enhanced effectiveness against modern body armor.

Of course, *the people who specified its performance weren't exactly thinking in terms of chain mail and breastplates*, Houghton reflected as he ghosted to a stop behind Bahzell.

"We've an intersection up ahead," the hradani said quietly.

"What sort of intersection?" Wencit asked from behind them.

"It's a four-way," Houghton replied, looking past Bahzell. "We've got another passage crossing at right angles."

"Aye, that we do," Bahzell agreed. "And there's a stink to it. I've no notion exactly what it is, but it's there."

"I hate it when you say things like that," Houghton muttered, and heard Bahzell's snort of harsh amusement. The Marine studied the intersection. Unlike Bahzell, he sensed absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about it, but that didn't prove anything. Particularly given the fact that he'd had ample evidence of the acuity of Bahzell's senses.

"I'm thinking we're needing Jack up here with his little toy," Bahzell said softly, and Houghton nodded.

"Unless I'm much mistaken," the hradani continued, "this tunnel—" a twitch of his head indicated the passage in which they currently stood "—is after turning sharp after it crosses. I'm thinking the other two

are likely to run straighter than that. So, it's in my mind that I go straight across while you're taking the passage to our right, and Jack turns to the left."

"And if there's something waiting to shoot you from the side as you go past?" Houghton inquired mildly.

"Well, in that case, I'd probably best be moving sharpish."

"Somehow that doesn't strike me as the most thought out battle plan I've ever heard of."

"I've heard it said hradani are after being simple, direct folk," Bahzell replied, and looked down as Mashita arrived.

"I believe it," Houghton said feelingly, never taking his eyes from the deserted intersection in front of them and wishing that he'd happened to have a flash grenade or two available. They'd proven their usefulness time and time again in urban combat situations; unfortunately, he hadn't anticipated anything remotely like this when he'd prepped for the mission Tough Mama's crew had expected. He continued to study the way ahead carefully as he brought Mashita up to speed on Bahzell's plan . . . such as it was, and what there was of it. Mashita didn't seem any more overjoyed with it than Houghton was, but—like Houghton—he couldn't think of a better alternative, either.

"You're right about there being something up ahead, Bahzell," Wencit said quietly just as Houghton finished. "I can't get a firm grip on it, but there's a glamour of some sort up there."

"And where there's after being a glamour, there's after being someone with a mind to hide something," Bahzell observed grimly.

"Exactly."

"Well, worrying changes naught, and time's still passing," Bahzell said philosophically.

"I know," Houghton said. "But I've just had a thought."

Rethak smothered a vicious curse. He was sweating harder than ever, and every dragging second he had to wait twisted his nerves tighter with Sharnâ's own pincers.

"Are they still just standing there?" he hissed at the thin air, ignoring the anxious glances the armsmen assembled in front of him were throwing over their shoulders in his direction.

"As far as I can tell," Garsalt's voice replied. "Bahzell and the other two have moved to the front, with Wencit in the back, and —"

Whatever the balding wizard had been about to say became abruptly superfluous.

"Improvise, adapt, and overcome," Gunnery Sergeant Houghton muttered to himself as he felt Wencit behind him. It was a motto which had always served the Marine Corps in general—and Ken Houghton in particular—well.

And if I didn't think to bring along a flash grenade, he thought with intense satisfaction, *at least I did think to bring along a wizard!*

"Now!" Wencit said sharply, and Houghton, Bahzell, and Mashita screwed their eyes tightly shut and bent their heads . . . an instant before the intersection in front of them exploded in a silent burst of light like the heart of a sun.

There was no sensation of heat, no stunning concussion such as the flash-bangs Houghton had worked with before would have produced. But from the way the blackness behind his closed eyelids turned abruptly bright red, he rather suspected that the flash itself was even brighter, and the stunning effect of pure light had to be experienced to be believed.

"Now!" a deeper, more powerful voice rumbled, and the two Marines opened their eyes and charged forward at Bahzell Bahnakson's heels.

Rethak staggered backward, his hands rising to his eyes. The armsmen between him and that abrupt explosion of brilliance had protected him from the worst of it, yet even the relatively small amount which had gotten past them was enough to savage his eyes and fill them not simply with blindness, but with pain, as well.

He was still moving backward when he heard a ghastly, wet, *crunching* sound and the first screams began.

Bahzell charged through the intersection, and as he crossed over its threshold, he burst through Rethak's glamour and found himself confronting a passage abruptly packed with armsmen. He couldn't tell exactly how many of them there were, but there were enough to block his way. Unfortunately for them, they were pawing frantically at their stunned, anguished eyes when he suddenly appeared amongst them. The tunnel was too cramped for him to use his sword the way he might have in the open, but there was room enough, and his lunging blade punched through the breastplate of the nearest armsman like an awl through rotten wood. Then he recovered, and his still-blind victim slid backward off the tempered steel, screaming as he clutched at the blood-spouting hole in his cuirass.

"*Tomanâk!*" Bahzell bellowed, and heard the sudden, deafening thunder of his allies' weapons behind him as they spun to the left and right.

Mashita wasn't really concerned about "accuracy" at a moment like this. The range to his farthest target was no more than sixty feet, and his opponents were packed into a tunnel no more than ten feet across. The armor-piercing ammunition punched through the front ranks, exploding out their backs in spray patterns of blood, then slammed into the men behind them.

Houghton had fewer rounds, and his weapon was incapable of sustained automatic fire, which meant he had to be more selective. He had the selector lever set on three-shot burst, and unlike the men in front of him, he could still see just fine. The glowing dot projected by his day-and-night sight settled on the head of a man less than fifteen feet from him, and his finger stroked. The target went down, and he tracked instantly to his left. Another squeeze, and another helmeted head exploded and another body fell.

Rethak backed away, still rubbing his stunned, watering eyes, as his ears told him what was happening to his carefully hidden ambush. The ear-shattering roar of the strangers' impossible weapons made it impossible for him to pick any details out of the general cacophony, but that was scarcely necessary.

Panic roared through him, urging him to turn and run, but he retained just enough control to know how stupid that would have been. There was a steep, winding flight of stairs back there. He couldn't possibly get down them without killing himself when he couldn't even see. Not that standing here, waiting while Bahzell Bahnakson carved his way towards him seemed like a much better option. Some of the armsmen felt the same way, and he staggered as two or three of them shouldered past him. They ran frantically, bouncing off the wall for guidance, forgetful (or uncaring) of the stairs in their panic, and an instant later he heard fresh screams from behind him—screams which were cut off with bone-snapping suddenness—as they went headlong down the steep stair.

He blinked again, and his heart spasmed with sudden hope. The barrier of armsmen in front of him had shielded his eyes from the direct impact of that intolerable flash, and his vision was recovering much more rapidly than theirs had. He could actually make out blurry ghosts of images, and he rubbed more furiously, willing his sight to clear.

It did . . . just as an enormous shape, glittering with a nimbus of blue light, loomed up before him.

Rethak squealed and turned to dash after the fleeing armsmen, but it was too late. He was still turning when an avalanche of gory steel sheared effortlessly through his neck.

XVI

"Rethak is *dead*, Tremala!"

The sorceress' head twitched as Garsalt's voice spoke in her ear.

"What happened?" she demanded. "Was it Wencit?"

"No," Garsalt sounded as if he were about to wet himself, she thought. "It was Bahzell. He and those other two. They mowed down Rethak's armsmen, and then Bahzell took his head off before he could run."

Despite the fear quivering under the surface of their own thoughts, Tremala's eyebrows arched.

"Why in the Lady's name did the idiot let *Bahzell Bahnakson* into sword's reach of him?"

"I think he was blind until it was too late." She could hear Garsalt's heavy breathing, almost taste his panic. "Wencit cast some kind of light spell. It was so bright none of them could even see while Bahzell and the others cut them down. Phrobus! It was bright enough it almost blinded *me* through the grammerhain! I think Rethak's vision was just starting to clear when —"

Garsalt stopped. Not, Tremala reflected, that there was any real need for him to finish the sentence. A light spell! Who would have expected that? And yet, it was as brilliantly effective as it was simple. Wencit's precious Strictures prohibited him from using his sorcery to directly harm any non-wizard except in direct self-defense, but there was no prohibition against *temporarily* blinding them.

Even if it did leave them totally helpless against someone else.

"What are they doing*now*? " she half-snarled.

"They're still headed straight towards the chamber."

"Garsalt, there's no way anyone could go 'straight'*anywhere* in this miserable place, and he has at least four options now that he's finished of Rethak! I need better than that, idiot!"

Garsalt didn't reply immediately—not in words, at any rate. An instant later, however, a diagram of the temple's tunnels, looking for all the world like an intertwined ball of snakes, appeared before her. It floated at eye level, and she saw one of the twisting strands glowing red. It connected Rethak's last position to the sacrificial chamber, but it wasn't the shortest of the possible pathways, and she wondered for a moment why Bahzell had chosen it. Then she realized. No, it wasn't the shortest path, once its sinuous twists and turns were allowed for, but it had started out leading in the direction of the shortest straight-lined*distance* between Rethak's position and the hradani's objective.

"All right," she said, "I see it. And I think I can cut them off here —" a flick of her finger turned an intersection in the highlighted tunnel a pulsating green, instead of red — and at least slow them down. But I'm not sure there's any point, if Cherdahn doesn't get his damned demon under control quickly."

"Everyone's insisting the sacrifice is going according to plan," Garsalt told her. Then his voice dropped, as if he were leaning closer to her to whisper in her ear. "Everyone's saying that, but I think they're lying. I think there's something wrong. Maybe badly wrong."

An icicle seemed to go through Tremala's heart. She told herself Garsalt was a coward, whose fears were almost certainly influencing his interpretation of events. She reminded herself that Cherdahn was one of Sharnâ 's most senior priests, hardly the sort to get things wrong at a moment like this. Yet even as she told herself that, she remembered Cherdahn's original time estimate. A time estimate which had expired at least twenty minutes ago.

The unaccustomed panic flickering within her told her it was time to go, time to cut her losses and flee while she was still alive. And with Bahzell and Wencit following the route through Rethak's position, she could actually get past them and make a run for it. Unfortunately, Bahzells never-to-be-sufficiently-damned courser was outside the temple somewhere. And, even more unfortunately, Carnadosa Herself had decreed this mission. If Tremala failed Her, the consequences would be almost as terrible as what Cherdahn and his acolytes were doing to their sacrifice this very moment. As she'd told Garsalt and Rethak earlier, Wencit's magic would only kill them, and that was infinitely preferable to other possible fates.

Besides, she told herself,*Cherdahn really may still have things under control, after all, and if he can ever get that demon of his out here. . . .*

"Stop being an old woman, Garsalt!" she snapped, venting some of her own fear in the angry contempt crackling in her voice. "We can still win this thing, and if we*lose* , how do you think*She's* going to react?" Garsalt made no reply, and she snorted harshly. "That's what I thought, too. Keep telling me where they are. And see if you can get anyone to tell you the truth about the sacrifice."

Garsalt glared at his glowing gramerhain with all the terrified fury he'd dared not throw at Tremala. She had to be insane, he thought. Surely she must recognize that nothing was going to stop Bahzell and his

fiendishly effective allies short of the sacrificial chamber itself! And he didn't need to ask anyone for the truth about the sacrifice. The girl's shrieks had passed beyond madness long since. Now they were beginning to weaken steadily. Not even the Church of Sharnâ could keep someone alive forever under its . . . ministrations, and they were losing the sacrifice before the demon ever responded to it.

Garsalt wasn't at all sure what would happen if the girl died before the demon yielded to Cherdahn's control, but he was certain that it wouldn't be good. Yet there was nothing he could do about it. Bahzell—and Wencit—were directly between him and any escape from the temple, trapping him between the sacrificial chamber and their own inexorable advance. Unless Tremala could, indeed, stop them—or unless Cherdahn could still somehow take control of the demon—Garsalt was going to find himself face-to-face with Wencit of Rûm or Bahzell Bloody Hand, and it was impossible to say which of those two would kill him more quickly.

Trayn Aldarfro lay almost motionless on the floor of his cell. He no longer twitched or jerked in torment, for the fire of his own life had burned too low for that. He was almost completely detached from his fleshy shell, and not because he'd deliberately placed himself in mage trance. If he'd been capable of considering it any longer, he would never have believed that anyone, even the supremely skilled torturers who served Sharnâ, could have kept that flayed, broken, shrieking wreck which had once been a vital young woman alive this long. It simply wasn't possible. Yet they'd done it, and Trayn's strength was almost gone. It was sinking in time with the sacrifice's life. Unless she escaped her torturers into death very soon now, the mage would die before she did and the demon would take her soul after all.

Tremala and the thirty panicky armsmen who represented the temple's final guard force, reached the point she'd chosen. She'd more than half-expected Bahzell and Wencit to beat her to it, but she'd beaten *them* after all. Probably because they had to advance with at least a modicum of caution, whereas she and her armsmen knew exactly where their enemies were.

"There!" she told the commander of her armsmen, jabbing an imperious finger down the passage leading towards the sacrificial chamber. "Position your men to cover that intersection, but for Phrobus' sake, stay on the *far* side of it, do you understand me?"

The armsman nodded jerkily, and Tremala turned her attention to the tunnel roof.

"Wait!"

Bahzell, Houghton, and Mashita stopped instantly at Wencit's barked command.

The wizard pushed his way up directly behind Bahzell, frowning, wildfire eyes slitted, and Bahzell cocked his ears inquiringly.

"I think we're about to meet up with another one of their wizards," Wencit said quietly after a moment. "As nearly as I can tell, there are only two left after your little encounter with the watery-eyed fellow, Bahzell. One of them is still well ahead of us somewhere, nearer to our objective, I think. But the stronger

one is much closer, waiting for us."

"And might you be telling us just what devilry he's after planning for us?" Bahzell asked.

"Unless I'm mistaken, it's not a 'he' at all," Wencit replied. "And as far as what she's up to is concerned, I'm afraid I really can't tell you. From the 'feel' of it, though, it's not a direct arcane attack. It's a pity she's not stupid enough to try just that."

"Why would that make her stupid?" Houghton asked, frowning in perplexity.

"Because under the Strictures, I can't strike her directly with sorcery unless she uses it first against someone else."

"Wait a minute! Are you telling us that after all of this, these Strictures of yours won't even let you *fight* her?"

"Not exactly." Wencit's tone sounded almost absent, and his frown of concentration deepened. "A wizard can't use sorcery directly against a non-wizard except in direct self-defense. Nor can he use it against another sorcerer, except in direct self-defense or in a formal arcane duel. But at least in an arcane duel, the weaker opponent—that's her, by the way—gets the first blow. The chance of her survival would still be remote, but at least it would exist. If, however, she were foolish enough to launch a direct arcane attack on you or Bahzell in my presence, then I would no longer be bound by the Strictures where she was concerned. I could attack her immediately, in any way I chose and with no restrictions on who gets the first strike. She wouldn't like that," he finished almost mildly.

Houghton started to ask another question, then closed his mouth with the click as the wizard's frown turned abruptly into something else.

"Ah!" he said with what sounded unreasonably like satisfaction. "*So that's* what she's up to. Quite clever, really."

"*What's clever?*" Houghton demanded.

"She's found a way to use the art without striking at any of us *directly* ." He nodded to himself. "Very well, gentlemen. If you'll follow me?"

Houghton's jaw dropped as Wencit pushed past Bahzell and marched directly down the center of the passageway. The Marine looked up at the towering hradani, and Bahzell shrugged.

"I've no notion at all, at all, what maggot's devoured his brain this time," he said. "Still and all, I think you'd best remember just how long he's been after taking black wizards' heads."

"And this is supposed to make me feel better?" Houghton demanded. "Experience is a wonderful thing, Bahzell. But—correct me if I'm wrong here— isn't this the sort of thing you only get to screw up at once?"

"Ah, but I'm thinking that's what makes life so interesting," Bahzell replied, and followed the wizard down the tunnel.

Houghton glanced at Mashita, and the youthful private shrugged. Then the two of them followed their companions.

"Look out, Tremala! He's coming straight at —"

Tremala didn't need Garsalt's warning. Or, rather, it came much too late to do her any good. She looked up from her place on the far side of the intersection just in time to see a tall, flame-eyed old man step calmly out into it.

For just an instant, she felt a sudden, incredulous surge of hope. She couldn't believe that after all these centuries, Wencit of Rûm would step into such an absurdly simple trap. Yet there he was, and as he took one more step, the spell she'd buried in the stone ceiling above the intersection triggered.

It was uncomplicated, that spell. True, it had required a sorceress of remarkable skill to create it, especially on such short notice, but that was only because of the sheer power levels involved. As far as complexity went, it was about as subtle as a meat ax. When Wencit stepped fully into the intersection, the stone above him simply shattered. They were deep inside the hill, under well over two hundred feet of solid rock and earth, and Tremala's spell split that massive overburden like a sledgehammer splitting slate. It collapsed, countless tons of stone and dirt crashing down in a precisely shaped and controlled avalanche, and Wencit of Rûm stood at its very focus.

Tremala's lips drew back in a predatory snarl of triumph. Visions of Carnadosa's reaction, the power and rewards awaiting the person who finally killed Kontovar's most ancient and dangerous foe, flashed through her mind. But Wencit never even glanced up. His wildfire eyes never looked away from her, and the soaring exultation of her triumph became something else entirely as he showed her the difference between even the most powerful wand sorceress and a wild wizard.

The hundreds of tons hammering down upon him suddenly stopped. A sphere of light, blazing with the same rippling colors as his eyes, erupted from the very air about him. It wrapped itself around him, then roared up with volcanic power. It caught Tremala's avalanche, stopped it in midair, and then—effortlessly—exploded upward in an eruption of wild magic that dwarfed anything Tremala had ever imagined. The rock and soil she'd turned into her weapon vomited heavenward. He didn't simply stop the avalanche, didn't merely turn it aside. Tremala's spell had worked with the natural force of gravity; *Wencit's* spell made gravity irrelevant, and rock dust sifted down as he blasted a two hundred-foot deep pit out of the shuddering hillside above them.

Tremala's jaw dropped as she abruptly found herself standing under the open sky at the bottom of a vast, cone-shaped shaft open to the stormy skies above. Whips of lightning scourged the heavens, solid sheets of rain pounded down, and thunder rumbled like the wrath of Tomânak himself. The shaft walls were smooth as glass, fused and polished by the searing breath of the wild magic, and cold rain steamed gently as it sluiced down them. It was forty feet across at the base, and at least three times that at its top, and the sorceress' skin tingled and crackled with the echoes of Wencit's spell.

No, not his "spell," she realized numbly. *That wasn't a spell at all. It was just raw, focused power, ripped straight from the magic field itself.*

No wand wizard could have done it. Power levels like that required exquisitely careful manipulation, with every possible safeguard in place. But Wencit had used none of them. He'd simply reached out to the energy from which the entire universe had been woven, and channeled it through the power of his will. She'd always known that that ability to seize the magic field by the throat was what truly made a wild wizard, but she'd never actually seen it, and the knowledge which had always been theoretical had not prepared her for the actuality.

A few pebbles pattered to the tunnel floor, and the last drift of rock dust settled, dusting Tremala's riding habit and drifting about her ankles like sharp, dusty-smelling fog. Raindrops came tumbling down, splashing the dust on her riding habit with large, dark circles, and Wencit looked at her.

"That was a formidable spell, My Lady," he said quietly. Fresh thunder crashed overhead, but the sound was distant somehow, perfecting the intense, ringing silence rather than breaking it. "Not many wand wizards could have cast it that quickly and that well."

"Apparently," she heard her own voice say, "it wasn't cast quite quickly and well enough."

"Apparently," he agreed. She glanced over her shoulder at the tunnel where she'd left her armsmen, but the tunnel wasn't there anymore. She saw only a smooth surface of stone, as solid as if the tunnel had never existed, and she looked back at Wencit.

"Doesn't that constitute a rather severe breach of your precious Strictures?" she asked.

"By no means." Wencit smiled. "I could have allowed just enough of your avalanche to rebound up the tunnel to crush them all to death. After all, I wasn't the one who created it, was I? But I didn't. They're all just fine on the other side of that wall. Of course," his smile turned colder, "that also means they're on the same side of it as your friend Garsalt and Cherdahn."

Tremala stiffened, her expression shocked, as he spoke those names.

"How —?" she began, but Wencit only shook his head.

"I'm afraid time is short, My Lady. Your curiosity will have to remain unsatisfied, I fear."

He raised his hand, and a spray of wildfire erupted upward from it. It reached up, then flowed outward to form an arching dome. The sides of that dome spilled back downward, falling like curtains woven of rainbows until they touched the stone floor, and Tremala of Kontovar found herself enclosed within a glorious canopy of light . . . with Wencit of Rûm.

"A formal duel?" She heard the slight quaver of fear she couldn't quite keep out of her voice, and it humiliated her. But Wencit didn't seem to notice. He merely bowed gravely to her, and she swallowed hard.

In its way, the offer of an arcane duel was both a compliment and a mercy, although she had to admit that it was a bit hard to see it that way just at the moment.

At least the wild magic is quick, she told herself, and, gathering all her courage, stepped out into the center of Wencit's canopy of light to face him.

He waited for her with a sort of merciless courtesy, and she reached into the sleeve of her riding habit and extracted her wand. Wencit only stood there, hands empty, waiting, and she frowned. There was something about him, something that grew stronger as she stepped closer.

No, she realized. It wasn't growing stronger because she was closer; it was growing stronger because he'd allowed it to. Or, rather, because he'd allowed the glamour no Carnadosan had ever even suspected existed to weaken, let her see what lay locked away within it.

Her eyes narrowed, then dropped to the sword at his side and widened in sudden, shocked understanding. No wonder he knew so much, had managed to predict so many attacks so accurately!

"My compliments, Wencit," she heard herself say. "I've always wondered how even a wild wizard could see the future as accurately as you've always managed. Thank you for satisfying my curiosity after all."

He bowed slightly, then straightened.

"My name," he said in flawless ancient Kontovaran, "is Wencit of Rûm, and by my paramount authority as Lord of the Council of Ottovar, I judge thee guilty of offense against the Strictures. Wouldst thou defend thyself, or must I slay thee where thou standest?"

Tremala didn't reply to the formal indictment and challenge. Not in words, at any rate. The tradition that the first blow in any arcane duel belonged to the weaker of the opponents, unless he chose not to take it, was more ancient even than the Strictures themselves. Tremala had come to realize in the last few moments just how hopeless her plight truly was, but whatever her other sins, cowardice was not among them. A sorceress she had lived; a sorceress she would die, and her wand swept up spitting livid green lightnings.

They ripped through the air towards Wencit like living serpents, and he raised his hand. It was a simple gesture, but Tremala cried out as her lightnings shattered against his raised palm and the back blast blew her wand into a hundred smoking fragments.

She stood there, clutching her wrist in her other hand, bent over the sudden pain where the exploding wand had stung her hand. She cradled it against her breasts, then made her spine straighten and looked levelly at Wencit.

"So be it." His voice was quiet, almost gentle, but there was no mercy in it, and he pointed a finger at her. "As thou hast chosen, so shalt thou answer."

The last thing Tremala of Kontovar ever saw was the sudden flash of wildfire light from that finger.

XVII

Garsalt stumbled backward, flinging himself away from the images in his gramerhain. Not even his mastery of scrying spells had allowed him to hear what had passed between Tremala and Wencit after Wencit's shields had enveloped them both. But he'd been able to see just fine, and terror had bubbled up inside him like winter quicksand as the sorceress' body had drifted to the stony floor like no more than another drift of rock dust.

They were both gone—Tremala, Rethak. And inside, Garsalt had always known both of them were more powerful than he. Tremala, especially, had been an acknowledged mistress of combat magics. More than a dozen challengers for her position on the Council of Carnadosa, most with extensive records of victory of their own, had faced her in arcane duels. None had survived, yet Wencit had destroyed her easily, almost casually.

Garsalt whimpered. The stone wall Wencit had erected across the tunnel guarded by Tremala's armymen had sealed that escape route. There was only one other way out . . . and Wencit and Bahzell were already moving towards it.

The balding wizard's hands scrubbed together in front of him, washing each other compulsively while he

shuddered in terror. If Wencit could annihilate Tremala that effortlessly, then —

His hands clenched into a white-knuckled knot, and his jaw tightened. This was all Cherdahn's fault! He was the one who must have given away the location of his temple somehow. It was the only explanation! And he was also the one who'd promised his precious demon would save them all!

The wizard turned his back on the glowing crystal.

Cherdahn's head snapped up as the sacrificial chamber's door flew open.

His eyes flashed crimson fire, and his lips drew back, baring his pointed teeth, as his face twisted in a snarl of rage at the totally unprecedented intrusion. In that moment, soaked with the blood of his handiwork and filled with fury, the remaining human portion of his being was scarcely even perceptible.

"*Howdareyou* —?! " he started in hissing, sibilant rage, but Garsalt had found the courage of trapped panic.

"They're coming!" he snarled back. "Tremala's dead, and Bahzell—and *Wencit*, Krahana damn your eyes!—will be here in another ten minutes!"

Cherdahn froze, and the worm of fear which had grown larger and larger within him even as he denied its existence to himself, was suddenly a crushing python.

He stared at the rumpled-looking wizard, trying to force his brain to work, but it was hard. His entire being had been focused on the ceremony of binding—on the sacrifice's agony and the way it had fed his own inner hunger even as he offered it to the Servant. On the ritual, and the propitiation. The fear he'd so resolutely suppressed, the sense of something *wrong*, had only intensified that focus. Now, for the first time in all his years in Sharnâ 's service, the ritual of sacrifice had been interrupted. And not even by another of the Scorpion's worshipers, but by a *wizard*. The shock of that blasphemy was so great it almost displaced his fear.

Almost.

"Get him out of here!" he grated, and one of his acolytes thrust the intruder out of the chamber. He wasn't particularly gentle about it, flinging Garsalt back through the door, then slamming it behind him, and Cherdahn tried to regain his focus.

He couldn't. His thoughts seemed to race in every direction at once, colliding, caroming off one another in showers of sparks, sliding like feet on water-slick ice, but one of them pulsed and beat above all the others, even through his intoxication with the sacrifice's torment.

Bahzell was coming . . . and he was almost there.

He glared at the door which had closed behind Garsalt for one more quivering second, then wheeled back to the altar.

Trayn was almost gone.

His breathing had become so faint, so shallow, that only the most skilled healer could have detected it, and the pulse which had raced madly as he contorted around their shared agony had slowed to a dying flutter. He'd poured too much of himself into the sacrifice. He was down to his final reserves, his own soul dipping closer and closer to extinction, yet still he held the link.

He wasn't thinking about it any longer. Indeed, he was no longer capable of thought. Yet neither was he capable of letting go. Some final store of determination, dredged not from training, or strength of will, but from who and what he was and the promise he'd made a terrified young woman, held him still. The shield he'd thrown about her soul frayed, thinner and more tattered with every shallow, fluttering breath, and beyond that barrier, the demon stirred. A forked, slimy tongue caressed the mage's failing defenses. It slithered across them, savoring the treat waiting on their other side, yet not quite able to pierce them. Not yet. But soon, the demon knew. Soon.

Cherdahn glared down at the quivering, whimpering wreckage on his altar, and terror-fueled rage boiled behind his glittering eyes. Anger was no proper part of the ritual. Anger destroyed focus, diluted the distilled purity of cruelty, the perfect technique of agony, the Scorpion's service required. Cherdahn knew that, yet the knowledge meant little beside his own fear and his fury at the sacrifice who had somehow managed to defy him and all his years of skill and training for almost an hour.

He snarled and reached for his knife once more.

Trayn's body twitched. A white-hot bolt ripped back over the link to him, exploding deep within him, and then he exhaled explosively and slumped back against the stone floor. He was no longer truly conscious, but some elemental part of him felt the unspeakable gratitude of a young woman's soul in the moment it found blessed relief in death. In that moment, she recognized exactly what he had done for her, and she held the link between them open just an instant longer, sharing with him the joyous vista opening infinitely before her, giving him at least a glimpse of what he had won for both of them.

Then she was gone, and Trayn Aldarfro inhaled his first deep, lung-filling breath in over an hour.

Cherdahn froze, staring down at the altar in disbelief and sudden, choking terror.

He felt his acolytes staggering back around him, felt them turning to run, but his own muscles were frozen. There was no point fleeing.

His eyes slipped to the knife in his hand. The knife which had never failed him . . . until today.

He was still staring at it when the bonds holding the demon disappeared with the last scrap of the sacrifice's life energy.

Garsalt picked himself up from his knees, looking down at the bloody handprints Cherdahn's acolytes had left on his tunic. He started to reach for them, then stopped. He was no stranger to blood—no

wizard attained the rank and authority he enjoyed in Carnadosa's hierarchy without learning the ways of blood magic—yet there was something different about *this* blood. He could feel the power in it, like acid, and his hand jerked away as if it had been stung.

And that was when the sounds from the other side of the chamber's door suddenly changed.

For just an instant, he couldn't quite identify the change. Then he realized—it was silence. There was no more chanting, there were no more shrieks, there was only silence, and a tremendous weight rolled off him as he realized Cherdahn had completed the ritual after all.

He was still turning back towards the chamber door with an enormous smile of relief when it exploded in a blizzard of splintered wood and a vast, scaled talon came slashing through the wreckage.

"Hold!"

The deep-voiced word of command froze Houghton and Jack Mashita in instant obedience. Their heads swiveled towards Bahzell, but the hradani wasn't looking at them. His eyes were closed, his ears flat, and muscles lumped along his jaw.

Bahzell was only faintly aware of his companions as he felt the demon exploding into freedom. The creature was completely unbound, free to make its own decisions, choose its own victims, and Bahzell could *taste* the rising storm of its exultant hunger.

"Walsharno!" his thought cried out.

"I feel it, Brother!" the reply came back, and they dropped back into one fused entity, despite the distance between them.

Bahzell watched through the courser's eyes as the entire top of the hill blasted into the rain drenched darkness. The demon heaved up out of the vast crater, towering against the lightning lashed clouds in a corona of poisonous green radiance. It was twice the size of the ones they had already faced, and grisly bits and pieces of the temple's last armymen showered from its working jaws and night-black mandibles. It loomed into the heavens, bellowing its triumph and its hunger, and the terror of its coming went before it like some black hurricane.

But then it paused. The vast, misshapen head turned, cocking to one side, and it glared down at the single bright, blue star blazing on the grasslands at the base of the shattered hill.

It bellowed again, and a defiant whistle of equine challenge answered it, slashing through the rain like Tomanâk's own trumpet. Walsharno, son of Mathygan and Yorthandro, stared up at his enormous foe, and a needle-sharp lance of blue power ripped out across the darkness. It smashed into the demon's sickly green nimbus, and the creature shrieked again—this time in as much hurt as fury—as the cleansing azure brilliance of Tomanâk exploded against it.

A whirlwind stormfront roared outward, and blinding light flashed, reflecting from the storm clouds' belly, etching the wind-driven wildness of the grasslands in its actinic glare. The demon howled, pouring itself up out of the violated earth into the pounding rain, flowing down the hill towards the courser, and Walsharno stood his ground.

He was not alone. Bahzell was with him, joined mind-to-mind and soul-to-soul, buttressing the stallion's wild, fierce strength with every ounce of his own elemental stubbornness, his own Rage. And Tomanâk was with them both, reaching out, opening to them, offering them all that any mortal—even his champions—could touch and survive. They poured their strength, their adamantine refusal to yield, into that glittering lance of light, and the unique alloy of mortal courage and outrage blended with their deity's power to forge and shape that battering ram of raw energy pouring out of Walsharno.

The demon screamed, writhing in torment yet continuing to advance, and Bahzell clenched his fists, leaning his forehead against the tunnel's stone wall while he reached deeper, and deeper still. He dredged up all that lay within him, and felt the titanic conflict wavering, seesawing back and forth.

And then he felt something else, another presence, and reached out towards it. For an instant, he had no idea what it was. It glittered with its own refusal to yield, its own fierce defiance, almost like another champion of Tomanâk, and yet not quite. And as it reached back towards him, he suddenly knew it.

A third mortal presence joined itself to the struggle. It lacked Bahzell's Rage, lacked Walsharno's fierce wildness, but it had its own unquenchable strength. Its steely core of determination and duty, its rejection of darkness and the power of a will which could die, but never be broken. And as it joined with Bahzell and Walsharno, it opened a third channel to Tomanâk. A fresh tide of power rippled into them, and the titanic cable of power raging out from Walsharno pulsed with a new strength, a new fury.

The demon paused. Its head and wings lashed, mandibles scissored furiously, and talons ripped huge furrows out of what was left of the hillside. It shrieked in defiance . . . but it also stopped. The green corona about it glared brighter, hotter, wavering like sheet lightning, as the torrent of Tomanâk's rejection battered its way through it inch by inch. The terrific concussion of that conflict seemed to shake the earth. The raw brilliance fountaining upward from it could be seen from fifty miles away. The thunderheads above the hill peeled back, burned away, opening a hole to the stars, and *still* the intolerable balance held.

It held, and held, and *held* . And then, without warning, it suddenly tipped.

There was one, final blinding flash of light. A ring of fire rolled down the shattered hillside, sweeping out in all directions like a tidal wave of blue glory, and the demon was gone.

XVIII

"I'm thinking its past time Ken and Jack were going home, Wencit," Bahzell rumbled.

He, Walsharno, and the wizard stood with Houghton and Mashita beside Tough Mama as the rising sun poured golden light over the churned and broken ruins of what had once been a large hill. Much of that hill had tumbled down into the streambed at its foot, and a large pond or modest lake was already backing up behind it. The liberated captives—over sixty children, and eleven surviving adults—sat on the wet, rain-washed grass above that slowly broadening sheet of water, staring up at the blue sky and sunlight they had never expected to see again.

Bahzell and Walsharno had healed the hurt among them, and the cleansing power of Tomanâk had blunted the worst of the memories, taken away the most horrifying of the nightmares.

Trayn Aldarfro sat with them. The mage's face was worn, his eyes filled with shadows, yet a deep, indescribable sense of peace enfolded him.

"I suppose it is time I started figuring out exactly how to get them there," Wencit conceded after a moment, smiling at the two Marines. "I've been just a bit busy, you know."

"Excuses, excuses," Houghton replied with an answering smile. Then he looked at his battered LAV and shook his head. "On the other hand, I'm not entirely positive sending us home is the best option. When Lieutenant Alvarez sees *this* —!"

"Well, as to that," Bahzell said slowly, looking at the faint blue glow, visible only to a champion of Tomanâk, which clung to Houghton even now, "I'm thinking as how we could be finding a place for you here, Sword Brother." Houghton looked up, eyes widening slightly at Bahzell's form of address, and the hradani smiled gravely at him. "We'd not have stopped that demon without you. That makes you one of our own . . . and a man's never after having enough sword brothers to watch his back."

"I —" Houghton paused and cleared his throat. "I'm honored by the offer," he said then, forcing himself to set aside the habitual armor of levity and match Bahzell's willingness to speak the truth of his feelings. "Deeply honored . . . Sword Brother. But I have obligations, oaths I've sworn to my own universe and my own country."

"No doubt you have," Bahzell agreed. "Still and all, a man's the right to make the choices his actions have earned. I'm thinking you and Jack both fall into that category."

"It's tempting," Houghton said frankly. "Very tempting. In fact—"

The Marine broke off, eyes widening, as someone else stepped out of infinity into the now.

Kenneth Houghton had never before seen Tomanâk Orfro, God of War and Judge of Princes, but he recognized him instantly. The deity stood before them, half again Bahzell's height, brown eyes and hair gleaming in the morning light. The crossed mace and sword of his order glittered on the breast of his simple green surcoat, and an enormous sword was sheathed across his back. The power of his presence reached out like a fist, yet there was no threat in it, no arrogance, and he smiled.

"I did warn you and Walsharno you'd find brothers in strange places, didn't I, Bahzell?"

Houghton hadn't believed it was possible for a voice to be even deeper and more resonant than Bahzell's, but Tomanâk's managed it easily.

"Aye, so you did," Bahzell agreed, turning to face his deity. "And I'm thinking as how I'd just as soon be keeping him."

"I know." Tomanâk looked down at Houghton, and the glow around the Marine strengthened. But then the god shook his head. "I know," he repeated, "and I'd be most pleased to see Gunnery Sergeant Houghton numbered among my blades. But this isn't his place, Bahzell."

Bahzell started to open his mouth, then closed it firmly, and Tomanâk chuckled. The sound ran through the morning like music, and two or three of the children by the water laughed out loud.

"There are times, Bahzell," Tomanâk said. "Oh, there are times. But I see that even your stubbornness has limits."

"I'd not be saying that," Bahzell replied. "If it's 'stubborn' you're wanting, then I've all of that you might need. But I'm thinking there's more than you've said."

"Because there is," Tomanâk agreed. "And not just the oaths he's already mentioned, the obligations any man of honor must meet if he's to be true to himself. That would be reason enough, but there's a stronger and far more important reason, as well."

He turned his attention back to Houghton and shook his head.

"I know what you're thinking, Kenneth Houghton," he rumbled. "And you're wrong."

"Wrong?" Houghton repeated, and Tomanâk nodded.

"You're thinking that what's happened to you over the last day or so has been your salvation. That you've rediscovered the difference between good and evil—the reason it's necessary to choose between them. And you're afraid that if you return to your own time, your own place, without your Gwynn, without such clear-cut choices, you'll lose that certainty."

Houghton's eyes winced at the mention of his dead wife, but he continued to meet Tomanâk's gaze levelly, and the war god nodded.

"I know what you fear, and why," he said gently. "Your universe is very different from this one. It's not mine, any more than this one is yours, but I know it. And as you've visited this one, I've visited yours. As I've explained to Bahzell, all universes are one, in one sense, even while each of them is unique. And just as Bahzell and Walsharno exist in dozens, or scores, or even hundreds and thousands of other universes, so do you. In some of them, you know Bahzell and Walsharno well. In others, you've never met . . . and never will. But in every universe in which you live, you, like them, have decisions to make. And, like them, you make them well."

"But —"

"I didn't say you always feel certain about your decisions," Tomanâk cut him off gently. "I just said that you choose well. You've questioned and doubted your choices in your own world. Indeed, you've blamed yourself for failing to choose at all. But the truth is that you've always chosen, and the choices you've made have been worthy of the man Gwynn Houghton loved. The man she still loves."

Houghton's eyes burned, and a huge hand rested gently on his shoulder for a moment.

"Your universe is not mine, Kenneth Houghton, but a part of *you* always will be. Bahzell can tell you that I know my own, and I know you. In another universe, even I may be someone else, yet still I will know you for my own whenever we meet, wherever we meet. And I will claim you as my own, proudly. But now, I must send you home. You have things to do there still, and people who depend upon you. So go home, Kenneth Houghton. Go home, remembering all that happened here, and remembering this promise: someday you will meet Bahzell again, and your Gwynn *will* be with you when you do."

Houghton nodded, unable to speak, then blinked rapidly as Bahzell clasped his forearm. He looked up at the hradani, and Bahzell swept him into a sudden, crushing embrace.

"It's just as well, I've no doubt, that you and Brandark never meet, little man," the hradani rumbled. "One of you per universe is enough and more than enough, I'm thinking."

"I'll miss you—you and Wencit both," Houghton said, and knew it was true. "It's been a hell of a ride."

"That it has," Wencit agreed. "I'll try not to catch you up in any more misdirected spells, though."

"Probably just as well," Houghton said, regarding the Tough Mama's damages. "The repair bill for this is going to be a bitch. And I don't even want to *think* about the paperwork when I start trying to explain!"

"Some things not even a god can protect you from," Tomanâk rumbled. "Still, the least I can do is see to getting you home again without making Wencit sort through all the possible universes first. Assuming, of course, that he'd get it right this time."

"Thank you," Wencit said mildly, and Tomanâk chuckled again.

Bahzell turned to clasped Mashita's forearm, as well. The younger Marine started to say something, then stopped and simply shrugged. Bahzell nodded back, and Mashita climbed up on to Tough Mama's scorched and seared deck.

Houghton followed him, climbing back into the commander's hatch and taking one last look around, engraving every detail on his memory. Then he drew a deep breath and looked across at Tomanâk.

"Let's do it," he said.

Lieutenant Jefferson Enrique Alvarez walked moodily across the vehicle park.

He hadn't gotten much sleep. Company and Battalion had both been less than amused by his report that someone had apparently decided to beam one of his LAVs up to the mother ship, and he wished he could blame them. Unfortunately, he couldn't. He couldn't even blame them for their obvious doubts about his own contact with reality. If he hadn't had over two dozen witnesses who all agreed with one another on the essentials, *he* wouldn't have believed it, either. Fourteen-ton armored vehicles didn't simply up and disappear in flashes of blue light. They especially didn't simply up and disappear taking his senior noncom with them.

Alvarez's jaw tightened as he admitted the truth to himself. No one liked losing men and equipment, even when he knew what the hell had happened to them, but losing Houghton—that was what really hurt. The Gunny had been the Platoon's true heart and soul. Alvarez might have commanded it; Gunny Houghton had *run* it. And he'd even managed, along the way, to keep one Lieutenant Jefferson Enrique Alvarez from fucking up.

But he wasn't going to be doing that any —

WHUMPF!

Alvarez stopped dead as an LAV materialized suddenly. It simply blinked into existence, twenty feet in front of him, and a fist of displaced air hit him briskly in the face. A ring of dust blew outward around it, and Alvarez heard a chorus of startled shouts rising from behind him.

The lieutenant stood there, staring at Tough Mama. She was missing one wheel entirely. Her right front wheel well was badly damaged—it looked for all the world as if something with *claws* had ripped it apart. The upper deck was pitted, burned and singed looking, the paint badly blistered where it hadn't been scorched completely away. And there were what looked like more claw marks on the front of the turret, as well.

But she was here.

The commander's hatch opened, and a familiar helmeted head poked up out of it. Alvarez's heart leapt with a tremendous sense of relief as he recognized it, but he was a Marine. And so, he folded his arms and glared up at the man standing in that hatch.

"And just where the *hell* have you been, Gunny?!" he barked. "Do you have *any* idea how much goddamned paperwork I've already had to do about this? And look at this vehicle! Just *look* at it! How the hell are we going to explain *this*—" he unfolded one arm to wave at the battered LAV "—to Maintenance?! What the *hell* did you do to my perfectly good LAV?!"

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the growing chorus of distant shouts behind them, and Alvarez refolded his arms, tapping one toe in the dust while he waited. And then —

"Well, LT," Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth Houghton said, "it's like this"

Appendix

The Gods of Norfressa

The Gods of Light

Orr All-Father: Often called "The Creator" or "The Establisher," Orr is considered the creator of the universe and the king and judge of gods. He is the father or creator of all but one of the Gods of Light and the most powerful of all the gods, whether of Light or Dark. His symbol is a blue starburst.

Kontifrio: "The Mother of Women" is Orr's wife and the goddess of home, family, and the harvest. According to Norfressan theology, Kontifrio was Orr's second creation (after Orfressa, the rest of the universe), and she is the most nurturing of the gods and the mother of all Orr's children except Orfressa herself. Her hatred for Shigu is implacable. Her symbol is a sheaf of wheat tied with a grape vine.

Chemalka Orfressa: "The Lady of the Storm" is the sixth child of Orr and Kontifrio. She is the goddess of weather, good and bad, and has little to do with mortals. Her symbol is the sun seen through clouds.

Chesmirsa Orfressa: "The Singer of Light" is the fourth child of Orr and Kontifrio and the younger twin sister of Tomânak, the War God. Chesmirsa is the goddess of bards, poetry, music and art. She is very fond of mortals and has a mischievous sense of humor. Her symbol is the harp.

Hirahim Lightfoot: Known as "The Laughing God" and "The Great Seducer," Hirahim is something of a rogue element among the Gods of Light. He is the only one of them who is not related to Orr (no one seems certain where he came from, though he acknowledges Orr's authority . . . as much as he does anyone's) and he is the true prankster of the gods. He is the god of merchants, thieves, and dancers, but he is also known as the god of seductions, as he has a terrible weakness for attractive female mortals (or goddesses). His symbol is a silver flute.

Isvaria Orfressa: "The Lady of Remembrance" (also called "The Slayer") is the first child of Orr and Kontifrio. She is the goddess of needful death and the completion of life and rules the House of the Dead, where she keeps the Scroll of the Dead. Somewhat to her mother's dismay, she is also Hirahim's lover. The third most powerful of the Gods of Light, she is the special enemy of Krahana, and her symbol is a scroll with skull winding knobs.

Khalifrio Orfressa: "The Lady of the Lightning" is Orr and Kontifrio's second child and the goddess of elemental destruction. She is considered a Goddess of Light despite her penchant for destructiveness, but she has very little to do with mortals (and mortals are just as happy about it, thank you). Her symbol is a forked lightning bolt.

Korthrala Orfro: Called "Sea Spume" and "Foam Beard," Korthrala is the fifth child of Orr and Kontifrio. He is the god of the sea but also of love, hate, and passion. He is a very powerful god, if not over-blessed with wisdom, and is very fond of mortals. His symbol is the net and trident.

Lillinara Orfressa: Known as "Friend of Women" and "The Silver Lady," Lillinara is Orr and Kontifrio's eleventh child, the goddess of the moon and women. She is one of the more complex deities and extremely focused. She is appealed to by young women and maidens in her persona as the Maid and by mature women and mothers in her persona as the Mother. As avenger, she manifests as the Crone, who also comforts the dying. She dislikes Hirahim Lightfoot intensely, but she hates Shigu(as the essential perversion of all womankind) with every fiber of her being. Her symbol is the moon.

Norfram Orfro: The "Lord of Chance" is Orr and Kontifrio's ninth child and the god of fortune, good and bad. His symbol is the infinity sign.

Orfressa: According to Norfressan theology, Orfressa is not a god but the universe herself, created by Orr even before Kontifrio, and she is not truly "awake." Or, rather, she is seldom aware of anything as ephemeral as mortals. On the very rare occasions when she does take notice of mortal affairs, terrible things tend to happen, and even Orr can restrain her wrath only with difficulty.

Semkirk Orfro: Known as "The Watcher," Semkirk is the tenth child of Orr and Kontifrio. He is the god of wisdom and mental and physical discipline and, before the Fall of Kontovar, was the god of white wizardry. Since the Fall, he has become the special patron of the psionic magi, who conduct a merciless war against evil wizards. He is a particularly deadly enemy of Carnadosa, the goddess of black wizardry. His symbol is a golden scepter.

Silendros Orfressa: The fourteenth and final child of Orr and Kontifrio, Silendros (called "Jewel of the Heavens") is the goddess of stars and the night. She is greatly revered by jewel smiths, who see their art as an attempt to capture the beauty of her heavens in the work of their hands, but generally has little to do with mortals. Her symbol is a silver star.

Sorbus Kontifra: Known as "Iron Bender," Sorbus is the smith of the gods. He is also the product of history's greatest seduction (that of Kontifrio by Hirahim—a "prank" Kontifrio has never quite forgiven), yet he is the most stolid and dependable of all the gods, and Orr accepts him as his own son. His symbol is an anvil.

Tolomos Orfro: "The Torch Bearer" is the twelfth child of Orr and Kontifrio. He is the god of light and the sun and the patron of all those who work with heat. His symbol is a golden flame.

Tomânak Orfro: Tomânak, the third child of Orr and Kontifrio, is Chesmirsa's older twin brother and second only to Orr himself in power. He is known by many names—"Sword of Light," "Scale Balancer," "Lord of Battle," and "Judge of Princes" to list but four—and has been entrusted by his father with the task of overseeing the balance of the Scales of Orr. He is also captain general of the Gods of Light and the foremost enemy of all the Dark Gods (indeed, it was he who cast Phrobus down when Phrobus first rebelled against his father). His symbols are a sword and/or a spiked mace.

Torframos Orfro: Known as "Stone Beard" and "Lord of Earthquakes," Torframos is the eighth child of Orr and Kontifrio. He is the lord of the Earth, the keeper of the deep places and special patron of engineers and those who delve, and is especially revered by dwarves. His symbol is the miner's pick.

Toragan Orfro: "The Huntsman," also called "Woodhelm," is the thirteenth child of Orr and Kontifrio and the god of nature. Forests are especially sacred to him, and he has a reputation for punishing those who hunt needlessly or cruelly. His symbol is an oak tree.

The Dark Gods

Phrobus Orfro: Called "Father of Evil" and "Lord of Deceit," Phrobus is the seventh child of Orr and Kontifrio, which explains why seven is considered *the* unlucky number in Norfressa. No one recalls his original name; "Phrobus" ("Truth Bender") was given to him by Tomânak when he cast Phrobus down for his treacherous attempt to wrest rulership from Orr. Following that defeat, Phrobus turned openly to the dark and became, in fact, the opening wedge by which evil first entered Orfressa. He is the most powerful of the gods of Light or Dark after Tomânak, and the hatred between him and Tomânak is unthinkably bitter, but Phrobus fears his brother worse than death itself. His symbol is a flame-eyed skull.

Shigu: Called "The Twisted One," "Queen of Hell," and "Mother of Madness," Shigu is the wife of Phrobus. No one knows exactly where she came from, but most believe she was, in fact, a powerful

demoness raised to godhood by Phrobus when he sought a mate to breed his own pantheon to oppose that of his father. Her power is deep but subtle, her cruelty and malice are bottomless, and her favored weapon is madness. She is even more hated, loathed, and feared by mortals than Phrobus, and her worship is punishable by death in all Norfressan realms. Her symbol is a flaming spider.

Carnadosa Phrofressa: "The Lady of Wizardry" is the fifth child of Phrobus and Shigu. She has become the goddess of black wizardry, but she herself might be considered totally amoral rather than evil for evil's sake. She enshrines the concept of power sought by any means and at any cost to others. Her symbol is a wizard's wand.

Fiendark Phrofro: The firstborn child of Phrobus and Shigu, Fiendark is known as "Lord of the Furies." He is cast very much in his father's image (though, fortunately, he is considerably less powerful), and all evil creatures owe him allegiance as Phrobus' deputy. Unlike Phrobus, who seeks always to pervert or conquer, however, Fiendark also delights in destruction for destruction's sake. His symbols are a flaming sword or flame-shot cloud of smoke.

Krahana Phrofressa: "The Lady of the Damned" is the fourth child of Phrobus and Shiguand, in most ways, the most loathsome of them all. She is noted for her hideous beauty and holds dominion over the undead (which makes her Isvaria's most hated foe) and rules the hells in which the souls of those who have sold themselves to evil spend eternity. Her symbol is a splintered coffin.

Krashnark Phrofro: The second son of Phrobus and Shigu, Krashnark is something of a disappointment to his parents. The most powerful of Phrobus' children, Krashnark (known as "Devil Master") is the god of devils and ambitious war. He is ruthless, merciless, and cruel, but personally courageous and possessed of a strong, personal code of honor, which makes him the only Dark God Tomânak actually respects. He is, unfortunately, loyal to his father, and his power and sense of honor have made him the "enforcer" of the Dark Gods. His symbol is a flaming steward's rod.

SharnaPhrofro: Called "Demonspawn" and "Lord of the Scorpion," Sharnais Krashnark's younger, identical twin (a fact which pleases neither of them). Sharnais the god of demons and the patron of assassins, the personification of cunning and deception. He is substantially less powerful than Krashnark and a total coward, and the demons who owe him allegiance hate and fear Krashnark's more powerful devils almost as much as Sharnahates and fears his brother. His symbols are the giant scorpion (which serves as his mount) and a bleeding heart in a mailed fist.

THE END

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