

EARTH MAGIC

*Alexei & Cory
Panshin*

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For our fathers:

Alexis J. Panshin
&
Ralph F. Seidman





PART I

ESCAPE

Chapter 1

The dun of Black Morca, War King of the Gets and as much of a ruler as Nestor could boast, lay out of sight behind the rise of two grassy hill shoulders. In this country, in these times, that was dangerously far.

It was a cool day in mid-spring, a Libera's Day that fell in that month when the sun was in the sign of the Wurox, Libera's Beast. It was a few hours after a freshening rain and the sky still held to an even gray. In the long hill grass at the edge of an oak wood, a hunting pig cast back and forth for the scent of a rabbit. Following afoot, arrow nocked on string and eyes alert, was a boy of sixteen named Haldane—nearly a man, but not yet a man—the one son of Black Morca.

He had been warned to stay within sight of the tower as he had been warned not to hunt alone. There were times when he did both, but this was not one. He was empty-handed so far, and he would not be. He was ranging far for a Get on foot, chancing the end of daylight, as vulnerable as any Nestorian cowherd to a meeting with Get baron or Nestorian outlaw. More vulnerable. If he was alert, it was for more than rabbits.

He waved and whistled the pig left, up the hill slope, there where a dolmen stood sentinel, one great rock balanced on another, placed so by men of olden times for purposes that no man of today could name. Slut, the pig, was small, black, and quick. Men of the Western Kingdoms might use dogs for hunting, but the Gets held to the brighter animals they had used since long before they seized this land. On a thong around his neck Haldane wore an amulet, a boar's tooth marvelously graven, which he prized. He had kept the tooth to remember the boar by and paid for the graving. Grunt, an excellent dog killer.

Slut's trotters dug small divots as she coursed the hill, snout to the ground. She was only a pig for small game, but she loved the hunt. The sight of a strung bow delighted her until she fairly wriggled with pleasure. A beautiful black little darling. Ivory tushed.

A light wind toyed with the grass, the young leaves on the oaks, and the boy's brown hair. The light was starting to fail and the wind to quicken, and Haldane was reluctantly thinking of calling the pig in. It would be dark in little more than an hour. If he were back in sight of the stockade before dark, his father would never hear, but if he had to be looked for, Morca would be told and he would have to take his buffets.

Morca was gone now with a raiding party into Chastain, smallest of the Western Kingdoms. Some two weeks past, Morca had gathered barons and fighting men, lean and restless after a long winter, and led them not for the close and easy border with Palsance across the Trenoth River, but south toward the Nails and Chastain.

Haldane had been left. Haldane had been embarrassed. Haldane had been left. He had the size, the skill. He was ready. He could place arrows with half the party and at worst he could handle a sword better than Hemming Paleface, who was half a Nestorian anyway. Since Morca's departure, Haldane had gone hunting alone every day.

Sometimes Haldane hunted on horse, more often on foot with only a single pig for company. Morca had drawn the limits of Haldane's world exactly. On horse he might ride to the forest verge beyond the village in the valley, the farthest point a man could see clearly from the tower. On foot he might walk to the crest of the first hill. Haldane respected the first rule and was careless of the second. He hunted on foot because it made his small world larger.

He had decided to start for home and was raising his fingers to whistle when Slut stopped abruptly and raised her head. Her ears perked. She strained and trembled, testing the air with her flat pink nose. Haldane lowered his left hand to the bowstring again and drew the arrow back.

Haldane waited. The breeze joined him, holding its breath. The leaves on the oaks hushed to listen. There was no sound, no movement except the suspicious craning of Slut's head. Then Slut slowly trotted forward. In an explosion, not a rabbit, but a hen pheasant, plump, brown, and sudden, burst from the grass and rattle-winged toward the oaks.

Fingers tight on familiar leather, string pulled taut, and arrow released. A dart speeding to overtake the bird. A good shot, well aimed.

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The aspen shaft struck the pheasant like a skewer and brought it to the ground just inside the verge of the forest.

With suspense ended, the tableau over, the watching world went back to its work. The wind blew coolly, raising goose pimples. The leaves whispered privacies to each other. Slut trotted rapidly after the bird, and Haldane followed down the slope. He was pleased with his shot. He did not enjoy returning to the dun with nothing in his bag. He wished to recover the hen and be on his way. The sooner the better.

Slut passed into the twilight wood, her dark shape merging into the shadows. Haldane followed the sound of her eager grunts, but before he reached the trees, she gave a startled squeal and burst out of the brush. When she reached the protection of his heel, she pressed close and bared her tushes at the wood like a true braveheart.

“On, Slut. Fetch,” said Haldane, and waved her toward the wood, but she stayed close. She knew where she wanted to be.

Haldane touched his boar’s tooth. He took a last look at the hill, and then set a new arrow to his bowstring. He shivered as he passed between the first trees. It was colder under their dark locked arms. Slut followed, grunting rapid little comments to herself.

His arrow was fletched in brown and white. He saw the feather and then the angled shaft. Haldane glanced quickly at Slut, still close at his heel, and then at the pheasant.

It doubled in size and glared at him with eyes like flaring sparks. Haldane drew his bowstring tight. The cat hissed once, leaped sideways, and was gone up a tree like a black mystery.

Haldane continued to hold his arrow ready. His heart was racing and there was a trickle of melting snow in his chest. He walked to the arrow. It stood alone among dead leaves. No pheasant and no remains of one. Haldane loosed the tension on his bowstring. He squatted, laid his bow across his knees, and pulled the grounded arrow free. There was no trace of blood on shaft or point. He smoothed the feathers and flicked away the crumbs of dirt on the arrowhead. He looked at the tree the cat had climbed and then put the arrow into his quiver.

“Well, boy, did you lose something?”

The voice came from behind him. It was old and it spoke in Nestorian, which he had learned from his nurses before he had learned Gettish. He heard only the words, not the language.

Haldane lunged forward, aiming for the cover of the nearest tree. Slut squealed as he half-tripped over her. He lost his balance but kept

his forward momentum. He tumbled and rolled, ending behind the tree he had started for. Slut huddled and grunted forgivingly to him.

He scratched her once to calm her fears, but who would do the same for him? He put arrow to string and checked his position. It was only now that he had time to think that he was sure he had been spoken to in Nestorian, the language of cattle, peasants, and outlaws. His heart galloped. He felt his horn, which was his from his grandfather Arngrim, but he would not blow it for help unless he had no other choice. He preferred retreat if it was possible.

The voice laughed. It was old and cracked. He peered cautiously around the tree bole, prepared to jerk his head back. It was no Get-hating Nestorian bandit ready to bury a blade in his back that he saw, but an ancient woman appreciating him and herself.

“Did I frighten you, now?” she asked. “I merely wondered if you had lost something.”

He started up with the intent of unstringing his bow and thrashing her out of the forest for her laughter. It is no business of slaves to frighten their masters or to wonder overmuch about their affairs. But her figure, by some trick of the eye, suddenly seemed the person of a giant troll mother. Framed by oak she was, that ancient dolmen rearing high on the hillside behind her like a giant mushroom of stone against the sky, and she leaned heavily on her staff. But when she raised it, thunder threatened. The black cat, smug in its knowledge, sat on its heels by her side. And Haldane was afraid and stopped short.

He recognized her. He had been told of her too often not to know who she was. That was why he was afraid and that was why he stopped short. Since the Battle of Stone Heath, when the unleashed magic of the West had struck the Gets a cruel stroke, lone Gets were wary about thrashing even solitary witches and wizards. They had no wizards of their own and magic was strange and terrifying to them.

The boy was more used to magic than most Gets. He had even learned a small spell, the Pall of Darkness, and had suffered the costs of using it—though all that was behind him now. It did not occur to him to invoke the spell any more than he would have dared to bare a sword in the presence of Black Morca. Indeed, his hand sought the comfort of his boar’s tooth, not for the contact with Grunt, but for the securities lent by the gravings, his clan markings.

“That’s right,” she said, gesturing with the staff. “Come close, boy.”

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The name of the witch was Jael. She was ugly with her years. Her nose was like a stripped chicken bone, her skin a withered weathered mushroom, and the veins on the back of her hands were as thick and blue as the yarn in Haldane's winter cap. She had been old when Haldane's nurses were virgins, many many years past. But her hair blowing wild about her face and shoulders was blacker than Morca's.

He approached warily. Nestorian though she was, he was ready to be polite. He wanted nothing more than for this moment to be done so that he could be off over the hills, pig at his heels, before light failed. This felt very much like an interview with Morca. His mind was a tortoise, his heart a hare. But he had had practice in hiding his fears.

"Who are you, boy?" she asked.

He lifted his head. With some pride he said, "Haldane, son of Black Morca, King of the Gets."

"Oh," she said. "Yes. I believe idle tongues have wagged somewhat of Morca to me. What do you do here in these woods of mine, walking abroad with only a pig for company?"

"This is Nestor," said Haldane. "The Gets rule in Nestor and Morca rules the Gets. This is Morca's land. Why should I not walk abroad?"

"Morca's land, Getling? There were people in Nestor before the Gets were ever heard of. There are people now in Nestor of whom the Gets have never heard. They remain, living in Nestor, and will in that day when the Gets are only a name."

Jael spoke, not with vehemence, but with a simple mocking assurance that disconcerted Haldane.

"A distant day," he said. "We . . ."

"A day soon to come," the witch said. "The Goddess is awake and walks again in the West."

Haldane's hand went back to his gravings. The Gets had left all their familiar gods behind when they first circled out of their high home plains of Shagetai. Here they had no gods to stand with them and they were wary.

"I know no Goddess," he said.

"Never fear, the Goddess will know you, and that is all that is necessary. Her passage shakes the land and her portents are everywhere."

Haldane said, "I know of no portents."

“Have you asked the plain folk? You don’t know enough to follow sheep, little one, but you will learn. Haldane Hen-Heart. Haldane Left-Behind. Haldane Dribblenose.”

“Those are not my names!”

Slut trembled at his passion. But those were not his names. He had no earburner, for good or ill, except sometimes Haldane Hard-head, because he was stubborn and could take a blow. He didn’t really mind that one. But he didn’t want these as presents.

“The wake of the Goddess is marked by change. Read the changes in your life, Haldane Libera-Liege, and you will see portents in plenty. The Gets will meet a bloody end on Stone Heath, and you will be the instrument of the Goddess.”

Haldane was a free Get, and son of Black Morca. He would be no one’s instrument. Who was Libera? The name of a day, the name of a wandering star. But this day was one of Libera’s. He was frightened.

“I won’t be!”

“You will be! When you are ready, when you are ripe, the Goddess will come and snatch the soul from your body. You are hers to take. Libera—”

She raised her gnarly staff in her gnarly hand and gestured widely so that Haldane’s eye was compelled to follow, there where she seemed to point, where rock balanced on rock. Her movements were slow and grand. And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, she brought the knobbed end of the staff down with power and precision and rapped Haldane smartly on the noggin. It set him on his heels and flaked a tooth and blurred his vision like wind-ruffled waters.

“I mark you,” he heard a distant crabbed voice say. “Libera’s Liege. Serve Her well and faithfully.

“And if you wish a portent to chew on, Haldane Eggsucker, your father awaits you now in his dun. He has brought you a foreign bride to wed.”

Haldane blinked to clear his vision. When his eyes were clear again the witch and her cat were vanished, stolen away by magic. The forest was empty.

The trees began cool conversation about the approach of night. Slut whuffed anxiously.

Chapter 2

There was but one road to the top of Morca's hill. From the point it left the last trees on the far side of the Nestorian village in the valley, through the settled fields, and up the hill where nothing taller than a berry bush was allowed to stand, the road ran under the eyes of the tower in the corner of the palisade. Both dun and tower were there before Morca.

It was not because the hill was high and the fort safe that Morca had taken possession of the dun, nor yet for its sweet spring or its closeness to the Western Kingdoms. There were higher safer forts on Breakneck and Crow's Nest and Little Nail, other duns with sweet clear springs, other duns closer to Palsance, Chastain, or Vilicea, and he might have had any of them. On Morca's Hill there was room for the largest dun in Nestor, and Morca had plans to extend his walls, plans long nursed.

Haldane met the road at the hill foot beyond the last field. Only then, in twilight but at last in full sight of the palisade, did he pause for breath. Slut had been pressed hard, poor pig. Her sides were heaving. She had been as anxious as Haldane to be away, even if her reasons were now forgotten. She nosed at his feet and grunted of her bad dreams. Haldane, his reasons better remembered, looked back at the darkening country and shivered.

He explored the bump on his head with a finger, and he worried the rough edge of his chipped tooth with his tongue. One pain connected the two.

A bloody end on Stone Heath? Stone Heath was long ago when Morca still hung in a cradleboard on his mother's back, before the Gets lived within walls. There wasn't a word that he had heard that he liked, from talk of a Goddess to talk of marriage. He touched the tooth with his fingertip. The finger confirmed what his tongue told him. It was a flake shorter than his other lower front teeth. Hardly a war wound to boast of.

Yes, and Morca home, so the witch had said. He took a deep breath and started up the road to the dun. Slut followed at his heel.

He slowed his pace before he reached the dun. The gate of the stockade stood wide. The men at guard were not the men Haldane had left on watch. Morca was home. The carls at the gate, Morca's men, grinned at Haldane as they saluted him.

"You're home late, fuzzface," old Rolf said. He was still wearing his leather war jerkin, but he vaunted no fresh wounds and he showed more signs of travel than war. Still, as proof of the raid he wore a fork with a bone handle, lashed to his dagger sheath with a piece of light cord so that everyone could see them. "Your command has been lifted, Haldane, and you out walking a pig."

Haldane bid Slut stay. "Does Morca know of your fork, Rolf? Fingers are good enough for you. Fingers are enough for him. He'll make you give it up."

Rolf shook his sturdy head. "Oh, nay," he said. "He has a fork of his own now. You should have seen the place we took. Stone walls as thick as a man." He held a hand over his head to indicate the width of the walls. "Forks everywhere. A trayful. Morca said I could take two if I wanted, since there were so many, but one is enough. My left hand is not so cunning as my right."

The other guard, Hemming Paleface it was, laughed and said, "You'll stab yourself yet, Rolf."

"I'll stab anyone who gets between me and the spit. My arm is too short. If I had a second fork, someone would have it from me in no time, and then where would be my advantage? And admire the cord. Isn't that fine? I think of one use for it and then another. For now, I'll just delight to play with it."

Haldane said, "Take my bow and bag, Rolf?"

"So you can escape Morca's hand? I'm on duty here. I cannot help you. But you are just on our heels. Slide the pig back to the swinery, nip through the back of the hall, and meet Morca in the yard tying the strings of your trousers as though fresh come from the outhouse."

Hemming Paleface said, "Any game in your bag? A freshly dressed rabbit would make Morca sweet." He had no wounds to boast of either.

Haldane had few words to spare for Hemming Paleface, who was not so much older, and not as good with sword or bow, but who was allowed on raids. But he would not appear small, so he forced himself to say, "Nothing. The gods of Nestor were not with me." And groaned inwardly as he remembered how much they had been with him.

"No matter," old Rolf said. "We've brought you a sweet little partridge from out of Chastain."

Both carls laughed. Haldane didn't laugh, but he did smile and show them the safe side of his hand, and they returned his salute.

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He led Slut by the collar into the courtyard. Truly it seemed he was on the heels of Morca's party. The mud of their tracks had not settled. How had the witch known? How could she have known?

The yard was a tangle of movement. Get barons, those Morca had raised, and their carls. Nestorian serfs. And a party of strangely dressed fighting men standing aloof between a wagon piled high with spoils and a heavy traveling carriage at a lurch in the spring mud. Fighting men with all their weapons. What did Morca have in mind? Who were these armed strangers in his home camp?

Morca himself, the full height of a Western bow and more, dark and hairy, black-bearded, black-visaged, stood by the painted carriage talking to a painted man. A small man, a stranger to Haldane. The mixed colors of his clothes were an offense to Haldane's eye. Haldane had never seen a Western man before, except for Oliver, Morca's wizard, and even Oliver did not dress this way. Oliver wore red, or on great occasions magenta.

The buildings of the dun were set in a hollow square within the larger square of the stockade walls. The stables on one side were large and sturdy. Directly opposite across the yard stood Morca's hall, even more magnificent. It stood a full two stories high, built of great rough-hewn timbers and fronted with a balcony, with room within to hold all of Morca's men. It was a luxurious building, visible sign of Morca's ambition even for those who knew nothing of his plans to enlarge the dun.

Haldane looked one way and then another, the pig he held straining in his grip. Before greeting Morca, he needed to rid himself of all the visibles of his disobedience. He caught the arm of a serf plodding past.

"Here, old man," he said. "Take the pig to the swinery."

"Yes, Lord Haldane."

The serf seized the pig, but Slut was in no mood to be penned. She squealed and tried to wriggle free, but the serf held her by collar and ear.

That was easy enough, but bow, quiver, and empty game bag could not be passed like the pig to a Nestorian. To enter the hall unseen, Haldane must do it from the rear. He looked after the old man, dragging the pig away by force of arm.

"Hey, hold," he said. "I have a question."

"Yes, lord?" The old man tried to make his respectful gesture and keep his grip on the pig, and did badly at both.

"I'll walk with you a distance," Haldane said, pointing to the swinery tucked in one corner of the dun out of sight of the courtyard. "You'll do better to loose her ear. She doesn't like that."

"Yes, lord."

"What . . . What portents have been seen of late by the *plain folk*?" He used the Nestorian phrase, Jael's phrase, rather than the Gettish word that came most easily: cattle.

"Portents, lord?"

"Signs. Strange occurrences. Omens."

"Omens. It's strange that you should ask of omens, lord. Lon, the son of Witold the Woodcutter, saw a wurox in the forest only two days past. So he says to anyone who will listen."

"Simple Lon? The boy who wets his smock?"

"Ah, well, yes, lord. He does, but he is a good boy. He saw a cow, he says, and he is very positive."

"What is this wurox? Of what is it a portent?" Haldane knew the wurox only as the name of a sky sign. It was no more real to him than that other sky beast, the pard, sacred of Jan.

"Why, lord, it is the wild bull of the woods in all the old stories. Libera's kine. Travelers say they inhabit the great forest beyond Lake Lamorne, but none has been seen here in Nestor since my grandsire's grandsire's time. They drop stones rather than normal turds. I have seen them myself, great stone whorls. But the wuroxen are gone. Until now."

Haldane's tongue went back to his flaked tooth. The edge was rough. That one little tooth edge dominated his mouth.

His heart in arrest, he said, "Does this mean that Libera is here in Nestor?"

The old man sucked his breath and nearly lost his grip on Slut. "I hope not," he said. "Veton preserve us."

He meant Veton preserve himself, for Veton was his god, and not Haldane's. Haldane had seen the old serf often enough standing in his gardens, sharing his wine with Veton, a great swallow for himself, a dollop on the earth for the god.

They reached the swinery and the swineherd came hurrying out to take the pig.

Haldane said, "If these wuroxen have not been seen in living time, how comes Simple Lon to know one?"

"Why, Lord Haldane, I've never seen a wurox and I would know one. They shit stones, as I told you. I've never seen the great bird of

the sea with a wingspan twice your father's height, but I would know it if I saw it. Wouldn't you?"

"I suppose I would," said Haldane.

Haldane's attention was taken by the approach of a bearded barefoot man of middle years, short, stout, and wrapped in a red robe. His name was Oliver. He was the only wizard in all of Nestor, one of Morca's luxuries, evidence of Morca's ambition. Great kings keep wizards. Morca kept a wizard. He slicked and slid his way over the rain-muddied ground from the weathered board steps at the rear of Morca's hall. It was usually muddy there. No shoes and his woolen red robe billowing about bare shanks. That mud would be cold between his toes and he made no practice of cultivating discomfort. His spells and experiments made sufficient demand on his health without him courting indisposition, he would say, often said, and he did his best to keep his feet dry and his belly full. He didn't fight, either.

Oliver hailed Haldane and danced to spare his feet contact with the mud. His unbelted robe had the appearance of a flapping half-pitched tent. In the usual way of things, his feet were shod, his robes were in place, his pockets were full of secrets, and his head full of answers beyond Haldane's patience to bear. At the moment, however, nothing was in place.

He said, "Your father wishes your immediate presence. He is holding me accountable for your coming. They arrived in a sudden hour," he said, to explain the self-evident.

The boy wasn't sure how much he liked Oliver, who wouldn't fight. He thought of leaving him floundering there while he passed through the hall, dropping bow, arrows, and bag, and found his father by himself. At last, however, he hooked his bow over his shoulder the way Morca had taught him to carry it, and said, "Let us go to my father."

He had an automatic clout to take, Morca's price for disobedience, but he was ready for it. He had bargained for as much, slipping away to hunt alone, but his head had already been broken once today and still ached. He touched his chipped tooth with his tongue and his boar's tush with thumb and forefinger, and he shivered.

"Is all well with you?" Oliver asked.

"Just the evening breeze," Haldane said. "I wonder that you don't feel it, Oliver."

"I do," said Oliver. "Let us get out of the wind." And he pulled his robe into an imitation of order and tied the belt.

As they passed between buildings into the courtyard, Haldane said, "Who are these strangers?"

"Have you no eye for panoply? A Get raider should be able to gauge wealth and value like a clerk lest he fetch trash. You have much to learn. Your father has for company Lothor of Chastain."

"A King of the West here? In the land of the Gets? Why not be satisfied with his head?"

"Ah, as to that, I cannot say. I was in my cell collecting my thoughts for an hour or two when your father arrived so suddenly. He sent no messengers to warn of his coming, and in these minutes he hasn't seen fit to take me aside for consultation. Perhaps he intends to roast Lothor for the company and wished to keep the meat fresh. Proper spits are not easily found in Chastain, so there was nothing to do but bring him home."

If Haldane disliked Oliver, it was in large part for his tongue which could deal blows no man in Morca's dun could ward, save only Morca—who was only rarely put to the test. Men were wary of the wizard.

Oliver had appeared suddenly out of the West with an eye to his backtrail when Haldane was only a boy and entered Morca's service, valued as much for his tongue as for his magic—as long as Morca was not put to the test too often. And he was not, for if Morca had use for a sharp-tongued wizard, Oliver had need of protection. He had been a younger son, and then a younger brother, his family of some power in Palsance, and he had filled his days with magic and other study. His pride being great, he had allowed himself enemies to match, until at last he had aimed a successful spell at too great and powerful an enemy and found his overmatch, not in magic, but in politics, and been forced to flee.

He told the story well, leaving the best parts to the imagination, and he told it rarely enough that it kept its flavor. Haldane had heard it only twice from Oliver, though other men might tell it more often. Oliver never named his enemy, but men around their campfires who claimed to know spoke of the childlessness of Richard, King of Palsance, and nodded.

In other days, Haldane had been in closer company with Oliver than he was wont to be now and liked him better. Not at first, of course. Oliver was far from Haldane's idea of what a Get should be—he was not Black Morca. He was a left-behind, a member of the train with the women and children, no fighting man, but only a counselor, and content to be; a strange, plump, remote figure, a man

who wore glass in front of his eyes to help him to read his book. And then, when Haldane was twelve, Morca informed him that he was to be placed in Oliver's hands to learn letters and numbers, magical figures on paper that no self-respecting Get would know. Haldane naturally resisted the idea. Black Morca was Black Morca without knowledge of these cabalisms.

Haldane said as much. A solid thumping—how else are impressions to be made?—altered his thinking.

"Learn," Morca said. "Train your arm. Train your eye. Train your wits. A king must be more than other men."

A king—Haldane a king? It was a new idea, a new possibility. Morca's father, Garmund, and his uncle, Garulf, who had died leading the Gets at Stone Heath, had each been War King of the Gets in his own time, but this was not the West where crowns were inherited. Among the Gets the strongest baron was king, and if there was any lesson Haldane had learned, any one thing that Black Morca had impressed upon him, it was that he was not the man his father was. Haldane a king? Was it possible?

And so into Oliver's hands he went and learned to read and cipher, and it was a strange, exhilarating world he found there far outside the ken of any man in Morca's dun, a world that could be shared with no one but Oliver. Oliver talked of Palsance and the great tourneys held under the eye of King Richard at the stone castle of Fomoria on Clear Lake where the best and strongest were given bid to enter Richard's service and stand behind him to face the threat of the Gets. Haldane laughed at that. The fighting men of Palsance were butter to Morca's knife.

Oliver spoke of the trading ships of Vilicea with their sails of blue and red and white, coursing the Bay of Whales to Grelland in the north, faring south along the Brenadine Coast of Palsance where the old mountain trees stand high, narrow, and naked with strange scales for bark, hoving round South Cape to the Isle of Orkay and to Jedburke in Pellardy that paid tribute to the Gets. And he spoke of the dead and wasted ruins of Nestria at the mouth of the Blackstone, the old city of the Kings of the West, the legend of which was so powerful that it had carried even to the far high plains of Shagetai.

"And you saw this yourself?" Haldane asked. "I thought the city of Jehannes was only a story."

"And the Three Kings too?" Oliver asked gently. "No, little one. I myself have walked the broken streets of Nestria and seen the monkeys at play on the toppled statues of the Three Kings. All that re-

mains of the old glory is bare ruin and empty desolation. There is a mindless village tucked up against the last standing wall of the city and barefoot boys shy stones at the head of Leonidus, the Poet King. His bust has had five hundred years of the abuse he merited in life. Remember that, and leave no statues. Or rule well.”

“I’ll waste no time in making poems,” Haldane said. But in his secret heart he was pleased that Oliver should recognize the stuff of kings in him. It made him feel that it might really be there.

So, in time, as he learned, he and Oliver came as close to being friends as a wizard and a boy can. Not truly friends, but they might talk to each other when there was no one else.

And then Oliver began to teach Haldane magic. Not the magic of simple figures reeling in the dance of multiplication and division. Not the magic of words on paper that could bring the dead voice of Leonidus, more poet than king, to life again after these five hundred years. True magic. The Pall of Darkness.

Haldane had balked. Haldane had questioned. But Oliver said, “Did your father not put you into my hands to learn? The things I have to teach you can serve a king as well as any man. The things I have to teach may serve a king better than other men.”

So Haldane had followed Oliver. He learned the signs of hand and the words, nervous all the while, fearing, uncertain, unsteady. And failed, as magic will fail those who fail magic.

And he tried again, until at last once and then twice he pulled the cold curtain of night over himself while the sun still held the day. His touch was uncertain—the second time the spell succeeded, the veil of invisibility covered Oliver as well as himself. His count was slow and far from smooth. And yet, the spell did work.

Nonetheless, he felt he was doing wrong. Arms, not magic, were the Gettish way. Force of arms was clean and honest, the mark of the superior, the road of those who rule. Spells and sorcery were the dirty tricks of the weaklings of the West, the cowards who had struck from secret at Stone Heath.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, the aftermath of the spell was nausea and weakness. Magic always exacts a price from those who woo her, a bride price: blood, weakness, disease, and even death for power. And the day following his successes, Haldane was too weak to swing his sword or sit his horse under Morca’s eye.

“What’s the matter, boy?” asked Morca. “You fail and faint.”

“Nothing,” said Haldane. “The sun is too hot. It makes me dizzy.”

EARTH MAGIC

Morca shook his head, but then he said, "Rest under the tree until your head returns."

But the sky filled with clouds and Haldane's weakness did not pass and the story came out. Morca's anger darkened the day more than any spell and his fists blacked both Haldane's eyes and left him sore as well as weak. Morca's temper was a well-used tool, but Haldane never saw him angrier than at that moment when he left the boy in a beaten heap and went to search out Oliver. What passed between Morca and the wizard, Haldane had never learned, but he was taken forever from Oliver's hands and after that, for the first time, Oliver's sharpness began to be directed at him as much as any other man. After that, they were no longer friends.

There was compensation of a sort. From that day, Morca publicly called Haldane his lieutenant, his second. It was a good name and it filled Haldane with pride, until he found it hollow, a word without power. Hemming Paleface knew how much it meant. Nothing. Morca might say once and again that he left Haldane in command, but when he raided, he raided without him. Even when he promised, swearing before men, swearing lightly, he raided into Chastain without Haldane.

Now, as he and Oliver walked past the great hall into the tangle of the courtyard to face Morca returned from Chastain, as the witch had said, Haldane tried questions in his mind.

He craved answers, but he would not say too much, not to Oliver. He would not tell Oliver of the witch's words—nothing of portents or Stone Heath, or a foreign bride, or his soul, his, Haldane's, torn from his body by this Goddess, this Libera. But in this moment when he could ask, he must have at least one answer.

They passed the high loaded wagon with heavy carved doors lashed one to a side like elaborate shields. Morca had been looking for a proper set of doors for two years.

Haldane shot a look at the huddle of foreign men out of Chastain and then he asked, "Does magic cost a witch pain?"

Chapter 3

The men of Chastain they paused near were a lean lot, leaner than Haldane, although Haldane was lean for a Get. Their hair was of an unmanly length, and though they wore their weapons well displayed, it was all in show because they gave Haldane and Oliver ground. They burdened themselves in hauberks of chain mail, shoulder to knee, and they held their helmets by the noseguards like clumsy bludgeons or tucked under their arms like men waiting their turn to bowl at the jackstone. Haldane wondered if they would flee in a herd if he stamped his foot.

Oliver looked at Haldane. These days he must even look up. No apparent matter to him that with the parting of the men of Chastain, they were in sight of Black Morca.

“Magic always takes its price without exception,” Oliver said. “It is the one thing I know about magic. What commerce would you have with witches? Do you seek a new tutor?”

“No!” said Haldane. “I saw the old witch Jael in the woods as I hunted today. She made a pheasant for my arrow with magic and then laughed. And she disappeared before me with the aid of a spell like your Pall of Darkness, but other. I wished to know if her tricks cost her pain.”

“Ah, no doubt,” said Oliver. His beard was white and cropped to the outline of his face. His lip and cheeks were bare and ruddy. His hair was gray and wild. He ran his hand through his hair and left it wilder. “But I wonder their meaning. Did she speak?”

“She laughed,” Haldane said.

“It must have been to hide her pain,” said Oliver. It was his way of closing the question. He indicated Morca with a lift of his chin and a wag of his beard. “Your father waits.”

Serfs began to light the courtyard torches against the darkness. Odo the Steward directed hands to the unloading of the high-piled wagon. Odo sent a serving woman across the muddy yard to show the knights of Chastain to their quarters. The gates of the dun were swung shut, a solid door for the wild night to rap at for entry.

As Oliver and Haldane approached, Morca caught sight of them. He pushed past the painted man, raising an arm. Morca was a dark, overpowering giant. He had charm and a rude wit, but lacked grace.

His subtleties were crude, and even his whispers were loud. His hand was heavy.

His son was little like him, except perhaps in owning wit and lacking subtlety, but he would never be as obvious a presence, never as tall, never as strong, never as whelming. Haldane's hair was a neutral brown. Morca's was a black and curly bush. Morca's hand could cover and hold Haldane's two fists.

Haldane readied to take his blow, but Morca swung his arm around his son's shoulders and pulled him close, saying, "Hey, Lothor. Here is Haldane, my son and second. My little brown bull to match your little brown heifer. Bring your daughter out and we'll introduce them. Introductions before weddings, hey?"

Haldane was staggered by the blow that did not fall. His heart was felled by the words that followed. Morca was in his gay and unpredictable mood. He was manic in his half-played game. What now? The witch's sight had been true—Morca's return had brought change indeed. Was he then to be Libera's brown bull, her wurox? Was he to be dumb-eyed sacrifice to a goddess he had asked nothing of? He felt himself a helpless hand-tossed die, spun for others' pleasure. At that moment, for that moment, he wished to be simple. He wished to be nothing, almost nothing—a housecarl. Still a Get, but not a king.

Lothor tugged his cloak into place as though Morca had set it awry with his violence. He held a brown-and-white dog, as neat and small as a puppy. His hair was white to his shoulders and he wore a fur cap ajaunt. He wore tight hose and he stood on heels strapped to pattens to keep him above the mud. He on his heels and Oliver in his bare feet in the mud were much of a height.

He said, "In Chastain, only one of equal rank would presume to ask to be presented. Marriage is hardly sufficient excuse. But since you were willing to forego your long-tried Gettish customs in favor of ours in the matter of a dowry, I suppose we must be equally civil."

He was no older than Morca, but he seemed older. His days as a leader of fighting men, if ever they existed, must have been early and brief. His voice was boyish thin, his face was paled with powder and brightened with rouge, and he carried a dog—and who would follow a man like that?

His traveling carriage was decorated in strong shades of yellow and red, and the drawn leather curtains that masked the interior were painted with gilt flowers. Lothor tapped at the door of the carriage with the head of his scepter, his thin stick of power.

“Marthe,” he said, “You must come out now.”

He spoke of matters beyond Haldane’s knowledge. His tongue was a twisted Nestorian that had more in common with the difficult language of Leonidus, the Poet King, five hundred years dead, than with the country speech, plain and simple, of the boy’s nurses or with the Western speech Oliver had brought with him out of Palsance. Still, Haldane understood him. His tone was clear if his words were not.

Lothor must surely be a king. Morca did not bother to understand him, as he would have understood any lesser man. The dog watched all, silent but eager.

The door of the carriage opened and a girl, a woman, a princess, Lothor’s little brown heifer, stepped down into the mud of the yard with some difficulty. It was impossible to tell if her clumsiness was the result of shoes raised and protected like her father’s. Her great dress of white and gold hid her feet. The heavy sleeves of the dress were a series of puffs and every puff wore a modest skirt of its own. Her face, underneath her broad-brimmed hat, was unappealing, sour and painted.

“Odo!” Morca bawled, calling like a herdsman, as she stepped to the ground.

She flinched at the roar of it and seemed to teeter, and was steadied by her father’s hand.

Odo the Steward, the Nestorian of highest rank in Morca’s service, who might even order housecarls to come, go, or stay, ceased his directions and overseeing as he heard his master call. His exhortations and movements of hand were no more needed than sideline signals to a squad of well-drilled horses on parade. The work continued smoothly without him as he came off the porch of Morca’s hall and out into the yard

“Yes, Lord Morca?”

“Unload the carriage,” Morca called. “It is empty now.” He turned back to Lothor. “Ha. I said if breakfast was early and cold, we should make our dinner here in the comfort of home.”

Odo began to draft serfs from the earnest ant line waiting to carry away what it was handed from the wagon of spoils to Morca’s storehouse within. Or was the wagon the dowry Lothor had spoken of? Trust Morca. For years, until men had drifted back to calling him Black Morca, he had been known as Morca Bride-Stealer, the man who paid no bride price. In these days, unlike the better ones of old, the name was no sully. Men had laughed and leapt to follow him.

The serfs hurried to the carriage. One bounded up atop and began to unstrap royal baggage.

Haldane studied the girl. His bride? Her hair under the hat was some shade of brown and pinned in draping curls. In this light, that was all that could be said. Her nose was long and straight and her face was round. He thought she must be older than he, all of twenty or more. And stunted, shorter than her father. Shorter than the Nestorian women he knew best, the nurses, serving maids, and cooks of the dun, or those he saw in the villages. Shorter than Get women, though he knew none of these, never having traveled, except once to his grandfather's when he was a child, and it being Morca's rule that men might marry but that married men might not serve within his walls. But the Get women of his mind and the Get women of his memory were taller than this.

The boy thought though he might marry this princess of Chastain, he wouldn't like her. He would close her away in a tight room and turn his back on the door. She deserved no better, and she would get from him only what she deserved. Men might see him with her and laugh.

Morca said, "This is Lothor of Chastain. The king. And this is his daugh—"

"No, no," said Lothor, changing the lapdog to his other arm. "Let me make the introductions. This gaping lurdane, my dear, is your husband-to-be. Haldane, the son of Black Morca. My youngest daughter, the Princess Marthe, the spring of my old age. You are not fit to lay eyes upon her, but I grace you with her hand. I do not know this barefoot man."

"Embrace her, boy," said Morca. "This is Oliver, my maker of magic. Oliver from the Hook of Palsance. Did you know I had a wizard? Would you care to try his skill?"

Lothor said, "It is a large place to be from. And the name is unknown to me. Call him wizard if you like. We have no barefoot wizards in the Western Kingdoms."

"Embrace her, boy," said Morca in Nestorian.

"But she's painted," Haldane said. He spoke in Gettish.

"Embrace her. You can wipe it off after."

Oliver stood silent. He did not speak to Lothor, but stood toes a-squelch in the mud and looked steadily at him, as though his sheer presence spoke against all doubts. Men here knew him if Lothor did not.

At his father's continued urging, Haldane finally stepped forward and put his arms around the stranger princess. The material of her dress was thick rich brocade, stiff and heavy under his hands. She must have been a-teeter on pattens because he threw her off balance and only saved her from falling by seizing her shoulders. She pressed at him to be free and, balancing, struck at him, knocking his bow off his shoulder so that it hung at his elbow by the string.

"Don't touch me," she said. "You have grimed and soiled my dress. Do you understand Nestorian?"

"My little bull," said Morca.

"I'll teach her to speak Gettish," said Haldane, speaking Gettish.

"Let us go in," said Morca. "At dinner, I'll have Oliver prove his magic for you. An Ultimate Spell, if you are willing to try your courage. Stone Heath in reverse."

"If you have so many wizards to spare," said Lothor.

"Wizards are of nature economical," said Oliver. "We suit the size of our spells to the occasion. We do not waste ourselves idly. But tonight I will show you magic."

"Odo!" Morca called. "Show King Lothor and Princess Marthe to their apartments. We meet at dinner, Lothor. Bring your fork."

"And you bring yours," said Lothor.

"I will. I will." And Morca held his new fork high, finer than Rolf the carl's, and he waved it. As he saw Lothor and Marthe led away, he said, "Come, you two. Follow me to my rooms. We will talk before dinner."

Chapter 4

Morca led the way to the hall followed by Oliver at one heel and Haldane at the other. Within his dun, Black Morca was first. That is what it means to rule. Morca was never late. Other men clocked themselves by him and nothing began until he gave signal. Whatever he commanded was done. Whatever he chose to want was his. He was served first and ate sweetest. When he walked, he was followed. Where he walked, way was made.

A careless serf, too intent on the heavy brass-bound chest he helped to bear to realize his mistake, stepped backward onto the portico and into Morca's path. Morca informed him of his error with a

casual backhand blow that separated him from the chest and sent him tripping over his feet and into the wall. The chest became too much for the other man and he was jerked forward. He dropped the chest and it landed on his toes, sending him into a painful dance.

All laughed at the joke but Morca who was content to grin hugely. Once when he was drunk, Morca had won a bet by breaking a door with a slack serf, a dropper of food and spiller of ale, lifting the Nestorian in his two hands and carrying him forward like a lance as he yelled his slogan, "*Alf Morca Gettha!*" The serf was broken as well as the door. Men still marveled at the thickness of wood that was smashed and the proofs of Morca's strength.

Morca said to the serf he had struck, "You'll never rise to serve within the hall if you continue clumsy."

"Your pardon, master," said the serf, first in Nestorian and then again in rude Gettish. "Please."

Odo the Steward rushed past them and began to strike the man. "Is this the way you see your lord home? There will be no meat for you tonight."

Odo looked to Morca for approval. He was still beating the shrinking serf when Morca, Oliver, and Haldane passed inside the hall.

After the cool evening air, the main room of the hall was warm. There were fires in both fireplaces and the air was moist and heavy with the odors of dinner seeping through from the kitchens behind the dais. Arrases, some of Gettish fashioning, some taken from the West, hung before all the walls and kept the warmth and homey smells well contained within the room.

The great dinner boards were being unstacked and laid across their trestles to make tables for the company. Barons joined with carls to make light of the work. It was honest work for a man to do. With Morca gone, three tables had been sufficient to serve the dun, and with so few to sleep in the hall, the tables had never been struck.

The three tables had already been increased to five and more were being laid. The benches were being carried into place. There was but one chair within the room and it was Morca's. It stood behind the main table in the center of the dais, solid, great and heavy, as tall as Morca and wide enough to seat two ordinary men. Morca's father, Garmund, had seen it one year in the West, known it as better than his own, and returned for it the next summer with a wagon and the strength to take it away.

“Hey, by damn, when do we eat?” asked Morca, his voice filling the room.

“Within the hour, Lord Morca.”

“Ale for all. Let’s have the dirt well washed from our throats. A good raid deserves a good end.”

“What about our guests?” called a baron, raising laughter.

“Send them all the water they will drink,” said Morca. “I’ll have my ale upstairs.”

He took the stairs by the wall to his rooms above, followed by Oliver and Haldane. No Get was allowed above except at Morca’s bidding, and no one at all was allowed to walk the upper porch above the portico but Morca. His wife had had permission while yet she lived, but since her fall and death, no one.

At the head of the stairs, sitting on a three-legged stool, was an old man, the oldest man within the dun. His name was Svein. He was one of the few who had been a man at Stone Heath and lived, one of the very few who yet lived these many years later. As his proof of the battle he carried a red lightning scar on his right cheek. For as long as the boy could remember, his hair had been white, but in other days he had been known as Svein Half-White Half-Right. He had served as Lore Master for Garmund, remembering the old ways, the songs, the stories, the sayings, the wisdom the Gets had brought west to Nestor, and applying them to these new times and new ways. Now he sat his stool before Morca’s door, guarding the stair in Morca’s absence and remembering for himself all the things that younger men did not care to know. He rose when he saw Morca.

“Woe,” he said. “Woe to you, Morca. You overreach yourself. You wish to be king in more than war. You would turn Nestor into the fourth Kingdom of the West. Your father was a good king, a right and proper king. He held to the old ways and bowed to the will of his peers.”

It was the sort of thing he was wont to say. As the last of those at Stone Heath, he was allowed by Morca to say what he would, however rude, however contrary. Morca had that much respect for the old ways.

“Have you been downstairs again?” Morca asked.

“No, I have not,” the old man said and plunked back onto his stool. “I have no need. I’ve been sitting my stool and minding my business as I should, but I can hear of your alliance to Chastain well enough from here. What your father would have thought!”

Svein pointed an accusing finger at Oliver. "It is his fault. You were a good boy until he came and now he has filled your head with gross ambitions. Garulf overrode the word of his barons and bought the Gets Stone Heath. What will your appetites buy?"

Morca said, "Be at peace, old man. You excite yourself. Sit your stool and watch my door well. When my ale comes, pass it through. There is ale for you, too, if your watch is good and your tongue ceases its flap."

"There is?" Svein rose and went trotting halfway down the stair. "Ale," he called. "Ale for me. Morca said I might have ale."

A fire had been laid and started on Morca's arrival. Nestorian serfs might pass within the room under Svein's watchful eye to do their work and leave again. The rules did not apply to them since they were not people. The stair was the distance between Morca and lesser Gets, but the distance between any Get and the Nestorians who served them was so great and obvious that it needed no emphasis.

Haldane sat him down by the fire on a three-legged stool the match of Svein's. Oliver closed the heavy door on the din from belowstairs.

Morca said, "Woe, woe, woe. It is all he can say. He eats and shits and sits his stool now in Nestor, but his mind dwells in Shagetai that we left fifty years before he was born. If it weren't for the respect I bear my father, I would cut his throat. That is a sense of tradition for you. I'm an old-fashioned man and he gives me no credit for it."

"You're a generous man, Morca," Oliver said. "If the world only knew. But what will your peers make of this marriage? You said nothing of this before you left. If you had told me what you intended, I would have advised against it."

"I know," said Morca. "That is why I did not tell you. That is why I am a king and you a wizard whose spells of occasion fail. I dare. You do not. I have no peers. I am king here and I will act the king. That is why you sought me out. Do you remember? With what other man among the Gets could you dare to practice your art?"

"None other. But I wish to practice it longer. I am your man, Morca, but what good is my advice to you if you will not hear what you have no wish to hear?"

"I will not be told what I cannot do! Study your book and be prepared to help me hold what I have taken. That is your business."

Oliver pointed at Haldane who was sitting by the fire, hands clasped, elbows on knees, listening tight to every word. His head did not move, but his eyes flicked from one to the other.

"You make the boy your pawn," Oliver said.

"That is his part. He is a pawn as I am a king and you a wizard. But he is a pawn who will be made into a king."

"Tell him of your intent. Let him know what risks he runs."

There was a knock then at the door and Morca crossed to open it. It was a serf bearing Morca's ale. Morca took pitcher and leather jack and bade the man wait outside for further call.

Oliver moved toward the door as Morca turned.

Oliver said, "Did you know that the witch Jael was seen in the woods today? Where she appears, trouble trails after. She is a bad omen. Kings and witches—too much power stirs about us. I will study my gramarie as you suggest. It may yet take an Ultimate Spell to keep what you are taking."

He closed the door behind him. Morca looked after him and shook his head. It was his bad habit to speak of others when they were not present.

"He frets too much," he said. "He lacks guts. He doesn't do, he dances. Give him a sword and a man to kill, and he would wash his hands."

Morca poured ale from pitcher to tankard and took the whole in one draft as he crossed the room. He set jack and pitcher down on the table that stood in one corner, swiped his beard, then turned and belted his son with the same backhand blow he had shown the serf. Haldane was knocked from his stool and stretched at his length upon the floor.

Morca shook an admonishing finger at him. "That will teach you to listen and mind. You are a pawn. Mine. Learn to do as you are told."

Haldane nursed his head. One blow added to another, and now he had a headache, a throbbing pain behind his right eye. The blow had come when he had ceased to expect it and he had been unprepared. He picked himself up from the floor and took his seat again, sitting silently, shaking his head to clear it, ceasing to touch it, doing his best to ignore the pain he'd earned.

He didn't grudge Morca the blow, for why should he? It was Morca's right. It was merely unexpected. The blow was far from the first he had taken, and he thought it fairly purchased. It was the price of hunting alone.

But then in an outrush, he let his reasons go. "You promised in the fall that I should ride on the first spring reaving! When will you count me man enough? I was called Haldane Left-Behind to-

day. Men begin to laugh at me, and yet I can outdo Hemming Pale-face. Why should he go and not me? I begin to envy men their scars. When the carls return I look to see their fresh-won honors."

And then Morca began to speak in a tone new to Haldane and Haldane could only stare up at him in wonder. Morca was a man who could no more easily call Haldane "Son" than Haldane could call him "Father." He was as bluff and rough in private as he was in public. This was the boy's secret and he told no one. He would pretend otherwise. Even in that moment when Morca had first called Haldane his lieutenant, he had been rough and bluff.

But now he said in a softer voice than Haldane had ever heard, "I know. I know. You shall have scars enough before I am done making you. But you must have patience. You are man enough to be left in charge. You are my reserve, as Garmund was Garulf's reserve at Stone Heath, and Garmund became king. Would you have me waste you lightly, boy?"

He clapped Haldane on the shoulder. "You are my strength. Without you, all my plans come to nothing. I need you. I would not use you too soon and lose you."

"But I am strong now," said Haldane. "Use me." But his heart was trembling on the edge of the jump to jubilation.

Morca said, "I do owe you a reaving. And you shall have it. It is time for you to prove yourself." He put his hand almost tenderly on Haldane's biceps and tested the muscle. "My son. Be all that I need you to be." His voice was intense.

Haldane could only look at him, Morca, the distant, dominating sun he followed, who ordered and denied, and numbly say, "I will." He was too filled to say more. His head was spinning. Morca was admitting of a need for him.

Then abruptly, as though the intimacy were too much for him, Morca rose and turned to the table, where stood his pitcher and jack. He did not break away completely, but he poured and finished his second tankard and then stood about patting himself on the stomach until he delivered a satisfactory belch, and only then did he speak again and it was in his customary hearty voice or something like it.

"It was a beautiful raid," he said. "Oh, it was fine. If Richard of Palsance were as simple as Lothor of Chastain, the West would lie open to any man's hand. There would be no need to draw the barons together behind me as one. Anyone could rape the West."

"And you would raise the barons? All the barons as in the old days?"

Haldane might well ask. Since the Gets had recoiled into Nestor to rule there after Stone Heath, the barons had been united in nothing. They had been arrogant, grasping, quarrelsome, careless of law, unmindful of clan, jealous of privilege, and unruled.

“What do you think a King of the Gets should be?” Morca asked.

“Leader of the Gets in war.”

That was the simple, well-known answer. Svein’s answer. Morca said as much. “These are new and modern times. We are no longer in Shagetai. What was does not rule what might be. I will rule the barons in peace as in war. I shall lead those that can be led. I shall inspire those who would be inspired. I shall beat those who must be beaten. And when I am ready, I mean to take the West. All the West, from South Cape to the Hook, Chastain and Palsance and Vilicea. From Orkay to Grelland. From Lake Lamorne to the sea.”

If Haldane was one of those who must be inspired, truly this was inspiring talk. It filled him with visions of Morca leading a great army into the West with Haldane at his right hand. He watched Morca in awe as he spelled out his full flashing vision.

“King of the Gets?” asked Morca. “Why not King of the Get Empire, master of greater territory than the Empire of Nestria ever knew? Why not all the world if a man can seize it?”

The Morca that Haldane knew did not like questions he could not answer. Haldane risked a blow to ask. “What of the wizards of the West?”

Morca waved the question aside as of no importance. “What of them?” he asked, roaring on. “They are dead. They died at Stone Heath and those that are left are small men, more theoretic than our Oliver, whom I can provoke to perform. Why else should I tolerate a man of magic? We were too weak to take the West after Stone Heath and the West lay helpless, too weak to defend itself. In our weakness, we did nothing. In their weakness, they survived. Our weakness is now strength—we have a new generation of Get fighting men. What does the West have? Still nothing. Lothor thought himself safe behind his mountains and his guarded passes. We spent a week crossing through snow and high rock on our mission of state, and Lothor still wonders from where we came. Give me an army and the West is mine. And yours after me.”

Morca paused, for the moment talked to an end. He poured the last of the pitcher of ale into his leather cup, sipped, and looked upon Haldane to gauge the effect of his words.

Haldane jumped up and seized Morca by the sleeve. "Call the Storthing together," he said in excitement. "Please, father, tonight. Let us raise the barons and go take the West!"

There had been no Storthing in Haldane's lifetime, none since Morca's election as King of the Gets. That gathering had been marked by quarrels and blood and Morca had prevailed only with the aid of his good friend Arngrim, who had been lieutenant to Garmund, though barely older than Morca. That was before Morca had taken Arngrim's daughter Freda and paid no bride price for her, opening a breach that had taken years to heal. In the meantime, though parties to this quarrel and that had changed and changed again, the quarrels had hardly grown fewer.

Morca pushed the boy away with his great hand, forcing Haldane to loose his fierce grip. Morca's cup was never in danger.

"Not yet," said Morca. "Not yet, but soon. I will call the Storthing when I command the barons. If I am to hold the West, the Gets must be united behind me. I will have my homage. I am not nice about the reasons. I will have some through love and some through fealty, some by command of their land or life. But I will have my grip."

And he finished his cup and the last of the ale. As though his habits were well known and taken into account, which they were, the door opened and the serf outside announced that Morca's dinner was served. While he stood with his hand to the door, the serf was brushed aside by Svein come pell-melling up the stairs.

"I heard them talking," Svein said. "That Princess Marthe is in the hall with her father. She expects to eat at the High Table. No one knows what to say."

Morca's table and dun were celibate, it being Morca's rule that no man should keep what Morca did not. Those of Morca's men who cared to marry were encouraged to establish steads of their own under Morca's protection.

Morca said, "Go down and tell them that the girl is to be served privately in her rooms. The custom of my hall is not to be disturbed. Call me for dinner when all is settled."

Svein turned and went out with a glancing look at the serf at the door. In the old days before there were serfs, a Get carl did his own labor and was proud. Svein was proud.

Haldane said, "When you speak from the balcony before a raid, you always say that women are to be taken where they are found and not dragged back to the dun. Do you intend to send this woman and me out to start our own homestead, our own dun?"

“What is a custom in the face of an opportunity?” said Morca. “By damn, you have no sense! This marriage is part of my brightest planning. Men will follow you. They like the thought of long tradition. You there, Rab,” he said to the serf holding the door open yet. “If you were a Get would you follow Lord Haldane and Princess Marthe?”

The serf nodded, “Oh yes, master, I would. Yes.”

“See, and thus with many. If I had not made a vow to your mother never to keep another woman, I would marry the girl myself. A daughter of the line of Chastain and Nestria mated to the ruler of the Gets. It is an epic.”

“The woman is painted.”

“Her age washes off. She is but fourteen. She has more spirit than you might think. She threatened to kill me at first. And listen to the roar she is causing. Your mother tried to kill me four times before we came to terms. See the girl tomorrow. You may find you like her better. And if you don’t, we have rooms enough to keep her in. The story needn’t suffer. Come along, boy. Let us go down for dinner.”

Before they were out the door, Morca said, “If I had only known before the softness of Chastain, I would not have spent these many years in wading the Great Slough and other adventures. When Lothor is well returned to Dunbar, you and I will rape an estate or two in Chastain. Mind you, we won’t tell the girl. We’ll spare her feelings.”

Morca started forward down the stair calling, “Remove the girl. It is my order, Lothor.”

Haldane followed, at a slower pace. His tongue touched his chipped tooth and he shivered and wasn’t quite sure why.

Chapter 5

Haldane was exuberant in the morning. Far out of sight of Morca’s dun and Morca’s tower, far beyond the huddled Nestorian village and the edge of the wood, Haldane galloped the cool forest avenue alone. He was loosed from all the limits and responsibility he had suffered in Morca’s absence, and he recked for nothing. He felt like a true Get again.

The mist that had held the dun when he left that morning had been blown away. As he rode the natural lane, the wind nipped the

boy's back and harried him onward. His horse drummed the mold and his heart raced to the drumbeat. He could not be slowed. He could not be stayed. He ducked the reaching branches that lined the forest gallery as though they were enemy broadswords slicing over his saddlebow and laughed though he lost his head fully five times to the cold wet kiss of steel.

Hemming Paleface, his guard and companion, sent by Morca to heel after Haldane, lay lost somewhere on the turning Pellardy Road behind him, unable to stand the pace. He had called to halt, to slack a little, but Haldane had not heeded. Why should he? Let Hemming explain to Morca why he could not keep up to a proper Gettish pace. If Morca would listen. Haldane could keep up.

Once again, Haldane saw himself riding beside Morca, leading the Gets into the West. Being Gets as Gets should be, bleeding and being bled, trading blow for blow, squeezing the throat of the world in a hand. No, not at Morca's elbow. Morca at the head of one army, he at the head of another—Morca's reserve. Vaulting the Trenoth River into Palsance, overspreading the West.

But this beautiful vision was spoiled by a thought. Suddenly looming in front of the progress of his armies was a plain. The boy had never seen the plain, but he knew it instantly. It was Stone Heath. Stone Heath lay in Palsance on the other side of the Trenoth River. Out of the stories of his childhood, he had conjured a picture of the place in his mind. It was an open landscape, a series of plains and cliffs, carelessly bestrewn with great rocks shaped like eggs and lit by wild and dangerous lightnings under black clouds. It was a deserted place of death and danger. And in Haldane's mind the two armies, Morca's and his, galloped headlong down onto the plain and disappeared into a sudden crevasse.

Haldane's gelding swerved at a bridle tug, but it served no purpose to dodge destiny. The army in his mind was gone and the plain stood empty under deathly skies. Haldane was abruptly sobered and drew rein. He looked to see if he were watched. If he had seen outlaws he would have killed them then. He would have cut them down for seeing him.

He felt it was unmanly of his mind to return to the witch's words and to dwell on them. Either he was a silly old man like Svein and Oliver, haunted by thoughts of woe and doom, or he was a Get, Morca's son, Morca's own man. To harry the West was not to meet a bloody end on Stone Heath. It need not be. Stone Heath could be ridden by. Cast the thought out, Haldane, and revel in your fortune.

But in the moment before he dismissed his fear, Haldane had a premonition, a vision that he knew not whether to heed. He saw himself returning home to find Morca ready to lead the Gets again to Stone Heath. Haldane closed the thought determined that should the vision prove true—which he would doubt—he would warn Morca no, whatever Morca said.

He halted his horse on the hill above the New Bridge, back on the Pellardy Road once more. At the ford just upstream from the pilings of the fallen bridge there were two Nestorians in gray smocks kneedeep in the chilly water. They bent and searched slowly in the water with their hands, but he thought they watched him, as he would have watched himself if he had been they. He sat taller in the saddle and looked back down the road for Hemming Paleface. Ear served better than eye on the tree-closed road, but there was no more sound than sight of the carl. So much for him.

Haldane set his horse down the road slope and trotted past the bridge pilings standing bare-kneed. He remembered New Bridge on Rock Run when the bridge still existed. He and his mother had passed over it as they traveled the Pellardy Road on their visit to his grandfather in his dun on Little Nail. Of that journey he remembered two things—the bridge and his steel grandfather, Arngrim. When they had left Little Nail, Arngrim gave him the horn that he still carried, though it was years before he could blow it.

He had wondered that a bridge so old could be called new and had been told not to fret about things Nestorian. But that was all very long ago. It was before Oliver had appeared from the West, before his mother's fall, and even before Morca's hall was built with its second story and its balcony. It was long ago when Haldane was a child and nothing had yet happened.

He reined his horse at the bank of the stream close by the wading men. He waited for respect. Haldane was armed and the Nestorians were not. He sat tall and dry on a handsome gelding while they paddled with the river bottom. He was a Get and they were cattle. For all these reasons he expected to be given attention.

The peasants straightened and touched their foreheads with dripping muddy fingers. It was funny to Haldane. Their fingers left smears. One peasant was old. The other was younger and larger and stood in need of a shave come market day. Like many Nestorians, he had a dull and stupid face.

Haldane was curious to know for what purpose they waded. "What are you doing?" he asked in Nestorian.

“Gathering clams for our dinner, lord,” the old man said. He pointed to shells looking like damp shale on the riverbank.

Would they really eat shells? These peasants ate many things like roots and mushrooms that a Get would know enough to kick aside as he walked.

“Mussels, too,” the younger one said, grinning foolishly.

Haldane shook his head. “How do you eat such stuff?”

“In a broth with fish and vegetables,” the old man said. “It is a very good meal.”

Haldane waved the answer away because it was not to the question he had asked. The *plain folk* misunderstood much that was said to them. Odo the Steward was a rare man. Most of his fellow natives understood only the plainest of Nestorian country speech, spoken slowly and clearly, often repeated, often rephrased.

The foolish one said, “We will give you some to take home, lord.” And he proffered a shell smeared with mud.

Not to be misunderstood, Haldane said, “Your food is unclean. It is not fit to eat. Now, what late signs or portents have you seen or heard tell of?”

“Nothing, lord,” the older one said.

“Nothing?”

“Yes, lord,” said the old man. He danced a little shuffling dance in the water as he spoke, shifting from one foot to the other as though he found it cold to stand. Then he balanced on one foot, drawing the other from the water and setting it adrip against his knee.

“What?”

“Nothing, lord.” And he shook his head.

“No signs at all?” said Haldane. “Have you heard aught of a wurox being seen in the forest?”

“Oh, that. Yes, lord. The woodcutters do speak of a wurox they have seen. I have not seen it myself.”

Haldane gestured with a questioning hand. “Is that not a portent? Bud Month is the month when the sun is in the sign of the Wurox.”

“No,” the old man said. “No, lord. There used to be many wuroxen in the forest. Many, many. They have been away. Now they return.”

“Ah, but if that is not a portent, then what is?”

The old man shook his head again. He was almost as slow a head as the other.

“I don’t know, lord. I have seen no portents.”

"Is that a portent, lord?" the great lout asked. He pointed past Haldane.

Haldane turned in the saddle. It was Hemming Paleface caught up to him at last. Hemming Paleface, a portent? Hemming was too familiar and small to be anything more than himself.

"I know him," said Haldane, "and he is not important."

Hemming reined his chestnut mare in on the slope above the bridge pilings. He waved and called to Haldane.

"Hey, ho, Haldane. Come."

Haldane waved back. "Come here yourself," he called in return.

But Hemming did not come. He sat his horse and waved again to Haldane.

Haldane was angered. Who was Hemming that he should refuse him before these peasants?

The wind blew overhead, scudding heavy clouds across the sky, and the light altered frequently. A sudden shaft of light picked Hemming out as he sat his horse on the slope. And they below were in a cloud shadow. In that moment, Hemming looked very like a portent. Or meat for an arrow.

Haldane brought his horse around. His jaw was set tight.

"When will you be putting our bridge back up, lord?" the simple peasant said.

Haldane looked back at him. Fords were made before bridges as any fool knows, and a Get had no need for more. The Gets were careless of bridges. Bridges that fell in Nestor under Gettish rule would stay fallen.

"Continue to wade as you are used to do," Haldane said shortly, clapped heels to his horse, and rode up the hill.

Hemming Paleface was two years Haldane's elder, but no bigger or stronger. He was not yet finally grown and his paleness was marred by the red remains of pimples nipped young. He was always pinching at himself. He was a dogged unquestioning would-be-good and only half a Get. Haldane meant to have him left behind in the tail when he and Morca raided into Chastain. He had thought on it overnight.

Haldane rode up the slope determined to throw Hemming Paleface from his saddle before the eyes of the shell gatherers. He meant they should know Hemming for a Nestorian. Haldane guided his gelding with one hand and uncumbered his bow with the other, and when he reached Hemming he slipped the bow behind his leg and tumbled him. It was an unfair trick fairly played. Haldane laughed

at Hemming sitting surprised on his rump on the damp Bud Month roadway. By his hand a solitary daffodil waved with the wind.

"Pick a bugleflower," Haldane said and rode beyond the hill.

But he checked there and waited until Hemming came riding to join him. In his hand Hemming held the lonely bugleflower. It was not what Haldane would have done, or perhaps it was.

The carl said, "Haldane, you shouldn't have thrown me. I wouldn't throw you."

"Couldn't," said Haldane. "Why would you not ride closer when I called for you to come?"

"I don't like me here so far from the dun. Morca said we two should ride together on account of outlaws venturing out with the springtime. I didn't know those peasants. Where were they from?"

"I never ask those things," Haldane said.

"As ready as peasants, they might have been some outlaws," Hemming said. He was called Hemming Paleface in the same manner that Haldane was Haldane Hardhead, but he heard his earburner more often. "If they were outlaws, it wasn't meet to dump me on the road. Here is the flower you asked me to pick."

Haldane took the flower, pale yellow trumpet-mouth, white star, green stalk, belated harbinger of spring. He held it gently.

"They were but peasants gathering shells for dinner," he said, believing that he made his point.

"Outlaws must eat too."

Haldane knew what outlaws would do because he knew what he would do if he were an outlaw. He had only two standards, himself and Black Morca, and Morca was only to be compared to Morca. He knew outlaws as he knew Hemming, and both of them were much like himself.

"But not shells," he said. "Outlaws would have too much pride. And those two sad cattle were no outlaws. They wouldn't be allowed."

Hemming bowed to Haldane's authority and agreed to judge as Haldane judged. That was because his standards, too, were Black Morca and Haldane.

"Nay, Haldane," he said. "Don't ride away from me. My mare will not keep pace with your gelding."

"Why should I stay for you?"

"I'm your man now. It wouldn't look right to the others if I were not to ride into the dun with you. They would think it strange. And

if you were killed on the road before me, I could not tell Morca. You are my clan, Haldane.”

Hemming laid a hand on Haldane’s arm, their horses standing nose-to-tail, wind gusts whipping. He spoke earnestly.

The old clans of the Gets, the Eight, were blurred in the long passage west and broken on Stone Heath. Morca enlisted men without regard to their grandsire’s clan, which other barons might also do, and dealt outside justice, for which he was resented by some. Haldane was a Deldring. Hemming’s father had been a Maring. The gravings on Haldane’s amulet, his boar’s tooth, which he would sometimes study, were Deldring marks. Hemming knew less of Maring.

Haldane tapped Hemming’s nose with the bell of the flower. “You are not my man. I am not responsible for you or anything that happens to you.”

Hemming spread his hands. “I am your man. I will hold your horse. I will fight for you. I will follow where you lead me. Keep me close.”

“Why would you follow me, Hemming Paleface?” Haldane’s mind trembled. He wanted to be followed, but by the right men and for the right reasons. He was not yet like Morca, who only wanted to be followed.

Hemming said, “Morca has ordered me to.”

“He ordered you to follow me this morning.”

“Nay, Haldane. He ordered me to be your man. But I like it. I will do better with you than with Morca.”

Haldane was angered. There was none of the rightness he wished in having his men tossed to him by Morca as Lothor of Chastain tossed scraps to his dancing lapdog. Not one at a time. Not Hemming. And then Haldane suddenly realized that there would never be a time when he could choose those who would follow him. He could only choose among them. That was more the way Morca would see it.

As though he were taller and stronger, more powerful and more certain than he was, Haldane asked, “How loyal would you be to me, Hemming? What trust could I place in you?”

“I will be your man, Haldane, in all things. I will do what you tell me. Then, as your fortune increases, so will mine.”

“Win my love. If Morca says for you to stay and I say for you to go, what will you do?”

“What do you ask of me? Morca would wring my neck. And yours too.”

Haldane leaned to fix his bow in place beneath his leg, still holding the spring flower in his right hand. When he straightened, he looked at Hemming and said, "I wanted to know if you would follow me. Well, if you will not act on my word before my father's, then return to Morca and tell him you would prefer to follow him."

"No, no, Haldane. I will follow you even if Morca wrings my neck." And the carl touched his throat wonderingly.

"Then dismount," Haldane said. And he brought his leg over his black gelding's neck.

The two stepped out on the sward, their tunics whipping about their thighs like drying laundry. The light was pale and green. The trees overhead seethed and boiled, cursing like kettles. Haldane bade Hemming kneel before him. Hemming sank to both knees and Haldane addressed him.

Haldane knew nothing of the ancient Western forms of fealty. He knew only Morca's practice, and tags of clan oath from childhood games. But he knew how to bind a willing man.

"Hemming, son of Wermund, if you serve me truly in all things, following my word whether I am king or whether I am carl, I will make you a main man of mine. I will see to your welfare. I will lead you to your profit. But if ever you play me false, your life is mine. I will kill you where I find you. So I do swear."

Haldane kissed the bell of the daffodil. He held it before him.

"Now, if you swear to serve me, and offer me your life as your earnest, then kiss this bugleflower and wear it as my badge."

When they two, Haldane followed by Hemming, rode through the open gates of Morca's dun harried by a wind turned cold, there were horsemen gathering in the yard. Haldane thought of his resolve to tell Morca not to venture onto Stone Heath, and his tongue touched his chipped tooth. No one had remarked on the tooth but his tongue knew that it was rough and shorter, and worried. But it was not Morca, only Ivor Fish-Eye and a party.

"Where are you to?" Haldane called.

Ivor was among Morca's barons, a narrow dark thinking man who would hide himself behind his dead white eye, then peep round the corner and flash his good eye blackly. His party was bundled against the gathering chill of the day and well armed. Among the party were two of Lothor's men of Chastain.

"We are off to hunt the wild cow in the woods. I will show these foreign men how a Get kills. I'll have the horns. What is that flower in your shirt?"

"It is my badge he wears," Haldane said. "He is my army."

"Are you a baron now to have your own army, Morca's Haldane? Will you match your army against mine?"

"Not yet," Haldane said. "After I am married."

Ivor hid behind his eye. "Perhaps you are right," he said. "I should force you now while you are small." He laughed, gathered his party with a hand and said, "Let us leave to seek and kill the unknown beast."

It was the most lightly spoken Haldane had found Ivor. They were not familiars. The hunting party rode out into the bite of wind and Haldane and Hemming into the warmth of the stable. Haldane left his horse there in the care of his army and crossed the yard to the hall.

Chapter 6

The main room of Morca's hall was set for hearing. Morca sat alone on the dais in his great chair, ankle cocked on knee, hand on ankle, enjoying his singularity. Before him, within a circle of crowded benches, stood a little baron, Aella of Long Barrow, pleading some case.

Fires burned warmly in their places. With breakfast long past and dinner a rumbling dream to be quieted with kitchen filchings, the boards and trestles were stacked by the walls. Barons and carls sat the circled benches listening to Aella and watching Morca, or moved about the room talking low amongst themselves, or perched atop the stacks, legs swinging. All but old Svein, conning the room from his staircase.

Haldane's ears and cheeks were heated red in the new warmth of the hall. He spied Rolf the carl leaning against the dinner boards. He joined him and asked with an inclination of his head, "What progresses?"

"Nothing," said Rolf. "Aella seeks leave to withdraw. He says he has present occupation at home."

This was news of small interest to the boy. Aella was a minor man befitted best for long dull errands.

"Where is your fork?" Haldane asked, for he saw that Rolf's fork was missing.

Rolf looked chastened. "I should have taken two when I had the chance. I lost it last night to a stay-at-home. Ludbert Lead-Butt won it from me at dice and he will only give it back in trade for my cord. I'll kill him and take it back, I think."

From the dais, Morca said, "Go then, Aella, You have my leave. But return for the betrothal banquet one week tomorrow and witness the sealing of Haldane to the Princess Marthe of Chastain."

"I will an I can, Morca. I will do my best," Aella said, and smiled. He bowed deeply and withdrew.

Before Morca could signal for another to come forward, Haldane made his way to the dais, conscious all the while of men's eyes upon him. It was more attention than he was used to, the result of this marriage of politics. He walked the straighter for it.

Morca saw him coming. In his great roaring voice he said, "Hey, Haldane, you have affairs to attend to." He waved to a Nestorian serf, one of Odo's go-fetches. "Go tell Lothor to prepare his daughter to receive a wooer."

Men laughed, led by Morca. Haldane stepped up to the dais and went to one knee by Morca's elbow. He wanted Morca to know what he had done.

He said, "Hemming and I have been riding. I have made him my own man now." He spoke low, for Morca's ear alone.

Morca replied publicly, making their business common property. "I know," he said. "It is just as I ordered."

"No," Haldane said. "Hemming follows me now. I have bound him to me by oath." He wanted Morca to know that Hemming was in truth his man now, and not Morca's. No longer Morca's to order. "He is the first man of my army and he moves by my word."

"Well and good," Morca said smiling. "And I will give you more men later."

He left the boy in doubt whether he did understand or no. If experience were the judge, he did not. He would not. He put his great hand on Haldane's shoulder and bore him down, bringing him to both knees.

"Here, sit by me now until your bride is ready to see you." He signaled for the next piece of business.

Haldane took his place at his father's feet. He had never been in battle but his heart bore scars. He looked out over the assembled men and like a good Get warrior showed nothing of his wounds.

He did not know the man who stepped forward next. It was a stranger to Morca's dun. But Morca knew him.

“Well, Soren Seed-Sower, what business do you have with me?”

Old Svein, sitting his stair, knew him too. “He is a Farthing, Morca,” he called. “His great-grandfather was your uncle’s enemy. Beware. Never trust a Farthing.”

Morca stood in sudden anger. He waved an arm like an axe blade. “Up the stair, old man! I tire of you, Svein All-White All-Wrong. You’ve lived too long. Open your mouth to me again and I will break your neck.”

And he sat him down again as Svein scurried up the stair to his stool and safety. Morca winked at Soren. “Say on.”

Soren was a soft plump man. He was no danger to anyone, Farthing or not, great-grandson of a strong and dangerous man or not. Haldane did not know the man, but he knew his name. He was an example often spoken of. He was called Soren Seed-Sower because he had settled to the land like a Nestorian. No one wanted to be called a Soren Seed-Sower.

“I ask your help again, Morca. Furd Heavyhand still harries me. Now he has taken five pigs and my fourth daughter back to his dun. I want my pigs back. I want Furd to cease his lazy raids. Let him raid the West like everyone else if he must raid.”

His tone made it plain that he had better things to do than raid the West or anywhere.

“The price is the same price you would not pay before,” Morca said.

“My oath?”

“No,” said Morca. “Your life if you break your oath.”

Soren shook his head. Haldane could not understand why Morca would want the allegiance of such a man. Should strength ally itself with weakness? If he were Morca he would have gone looking for Furd Heavyhand. Better one of Furd than five of Soren.

Soren said, “What will you do to Furd?”

“I will make him cease his raids and return your pigs. And your daughter, too, if you like.”

“That isn’t necessary. Let him keep her. She will make a sober man of him,” Soren said. “All right. I will give you my word, Morca.”

He was bending his knee before Morca when the serf returned from Lothor.

“Hold,” said Morca to Soren, and waved the go-fetch forward.

Soren, fat as a brood sow ready to drop a litter, was left half-bent. He had to make the decision to rise, set, or remain halfway in-between, and he bobbed indecisively, raising a laugh from these on-

lookers who were ready to find a laugh in him. He flushed, but then apparently decided that since he was to end on his knees eventually, he might as well do it and be done, and plopped down awkwardly.

The serf spoke to Black Morca. "Lord Morca, the little foreign king says his daughter will receive Lord Haldane now. She waits him in the small room."

Morca nodded, waved him away to his corner with one hand, and nudged Haldane with the other.

"There's the signal, boy. The Princess Marthe waits for you. Go on, now."

"I would as lief not go. I have met the girl. I know already what she looks like."

Morca clenched his great right fist and showed it to Haldane. "You are marrying the girl," he said. "Don't you think she deserves a second look before you are betrothed?"

Haldane said hastily, "Oh, all right then."

As he left the room, Morca called after, "Don't let her make a sober man of you." And there was laughter.

Haldane paused outside the door of the small room where the princess awaited him. Lothor's little brown heifer. His price for becoming a king and living an epic. He counted to five and to five again, and opened the door.

She stood waiting opposite the door, Lothor's little dog in her arms, a tirewoman at her elbow. The dog yapped to see Haldane.

Marthe was shorter than he remembered. Today she wore no hat and bore less paint, but again she wore a dress that swallowed her. The sleeves were puffed and slit. Her dresses all seemed to have puffed sleeves that made her appear chubby and graceless. Gold chains hung down over her tight, jeweled bodice. Her hair was golden brown, her face was round, and her nose straight and high-bridged. She looked more the younger girl Morca had made her.

Last night after Lothor had retired, it had been recounted how Morca's party had halted well short of the dun at Lothor's insistence so that he and the Princess Marthe might change from their traveling clothes. They wished to make a grand appearance at Morca's dun. They wished to impress all the important people waiting there. The Gets had let them, laughing to themselves.

"But why did they do it?" Haldane asked. If he changed his clothes once in a twelvenight he counted it often. More like once in a month. And every man who mattered in Morca's dun was with the party. "Who was it for?"

"Well, it must have been for you," said Morca. "And Oliver. And the pigs. And the kitchen women." Everyone laughed as he worked his way down the scale. "Were you impressed?"

"No," said Haldane. "As for the kitchen women, you must ask them."

Now looking the girl over, he still was not impressed. As he closed the door behind him, Marthe handed the dog to the tirewoman who retired a step or two, not so far that she couldn't hear all that was said, but far enough to remove herself from the affairs of her betters, at least by implication. The dog was a trembling fragile thing and it strained futilely to be free. Grunt would have been ashamed to kill it.

Still without a word—for what did he have to say to her?—Haldane walked around Marthe, taking advantage of the opportunity to see her from all sides. That, after all, was his reason for coming. As he passed her, the tirewoman backed even farther as though to give him all the room he could demand and an extra margin for her own peace of mind. She was a gray woman dressed in gray—grayness compounded.

The young Princess of Chastain tried to turn to continue facing him, but her skirts were long and heavy and allowed no freedom of movement. To turn without tangling she must stoop and lift her skirts free. She refused to stoop and she would not tangle herself so she stood still, wrestling with fury, while he looked at her. It pleased him to make her angry because there was nothing else about her that could please him and he craved some satisfaction.

"Have you stripped me with your eyes to your content, you barbarian pig?" she asked.

It was a well-turned nastiness in the narrow Nestorian spoken by the highborn of Chastain, but in the distance between them the nuance was lost. Haldane heard only, "Have you seen your fill?" He did not recognize the word "barbarian." It was not a word used by peasants, by Oliver, or by Leonidus the Poet King. And pigs smelled far sweeter to him than they did to her. He came very close to hearing a compliment. Only her tone saved her meaning.

He surprised her by replying in his simple country Nestorian: "That I have. My fill and more." She clearly hadn't expected to be understood at all, but had been speaking bravely for the tirewoman to hear. He turned his back and walked to a chest by the door, which he took for a seat.

"So you speak Nestorian," she said.

"That I may talk to serfs and my orders be understood," he said. "But I will teach you Gettish."

"I will not learn it!"

"Please yourself. You may sit in this room and face the wall until you die if that is what you like. You may mumble Nestorian to yourself as you do."

"I will entreat My Lady Libera to strike me dead and burn this place with fire after me."

Haldane's hand went to his boar's tooth. He was afraid, struck to the heart by her words as he would be by any mention of the Goddess. But he would show none of it. Was she kind of the Goddess? Was the witch's hand in this? No matter. He forced a lifted chin, a laugh, and light words.

"Tell me more of your Libera and what she will do."

But she shook her head a sudden and determined no as though she felt she had said too much. And then she just stared at him, her eyes great and round. There was a long and numbing silence.

"Say on."

But she said nothing.

"Say something."

At last she said, "Do you wish me to speak of the weather?"

"If you like."

"I like it not at all. It has been nothing but clouds and cold and rain since we crossed the Nails."

Haldane said, "It is spring." But she was speaking and not listening.

"Or health? I am bruised and sore from traveling over fallen roads." Marthe spoke intensely. "Would you like another subject?"

"An you wish," Haldane said.

"I wanted to have a bath last night and they told me I must wait until we are betrothed. Is this a Gettish custom?"

The tirewoman gasped. In a small voice she said, "Oh, my lady! You told your father you would not ask."

"I am asking. Must I stay travel-dirty until we are betrothed?"

"No," said Haldane. "You must stay travel-dirty until bath night. That is Cel's Day coming, the day we are plighted."

She turned away and looked upward. In a desperate voice she said, "Oh, my life! Am I lost? Am I lost? Oh, if I were only home again where life is right. What must I forego next?"

Haldane said, "You are much too nice. I'll wager my father's treasure that when you shit you have a servant standing ready to wipe you.

You are a heavy price to pay for ambition. You should have stayed at home with your own in Chastain and never entered my life.”

This stung the girl. Her head snapped round to face him. Her eyes widened in outrage. She opened her mouth to speak and no words came. She hit the air with her fists in frustration.

Finally she managed to say in pain and anger, “I had no choice! Your butcher father has dragged me here to marry you against my will. If I could I would kill him, and you too.”

Haldane shrugged. “Sheep are made to be shorn.”

“A sheep?” the girl asked. She reached into the folds of her skirt and brought forth a knife. It was no plaything. It was narrower in the blade than Haldane would have liked, but yet it looked to be a mean stinger in the hands of one who could use it. If this girl was one.

“You have brought me here,” she said. “You may marry me. But mind yourself. If you ever lay a hand on me, I shall kill you.”

On the instant Haldane was off the great chest on which he sat and across the room. He lifted his left hand and struck the small Princess of Chastain a smart slap on the cheek. The dog in the tire-woman’s arms yapped sharply. The girl slowly touched her reddening cheek as though to confirm the blow.

“There,” Haldane said. “Now I’ve laid a hand on you.”

When Haldane returned to the hall, it was to find Morca’s audience concluded and the room emptying of men. He saw Oliver in his red robe, his spectacles on his nose, crossing the room slowly to accost Morca at the foot of his stair. Oliver looked to be suffering the hobbles for his successful display of magical craft before Lothor at dinner. Haldane had not expected to see him abroad today.

Morca raised a palm to Oliver. It held him at bay. “Put out your pipe if you please to talk to me. I will not be smoked to death.”

Smoking was a strange and filthy habit Oliver had brought with him out of the West. He said it was a necessary part of his magic. The yellow weed he smoked smelled worse than a singed chicken. It was another reason that men were wary of him. When Haldane had studied magic so briefly, the prospect of having to smoke had dismayed him. He had not studied so long that his dismay was tested.

Oliver put his palm over the bowl. “I was in my cell studying my book for you and your benefit, instead of sleeping as I would, when I heard that yet another baron has craved leave to depart. How much reason to study my book will you give me?”

“It was only Aella of Long Barrow.”

“Don’t say ‘only Aella.’ If you followed my advice you would let no one leave until the betrothal is made and Lothor returned to Chastain. There are too many who will not like this marriage.”

“Aella will return for the betrothal. And today Soren Seed-Sower has joined me. He likes this marriage fine. And his brothers will follow him shortly into my hands, or so he swears.” Morca waved Oliver away. “Put your fears to rest, return to your cell and have your sleep. Nap until dinner.”

“I do not speak of lackweights like Aella and Soren. Larger men than they care what you do. In times like these, with witches and kings all about us, outlaws in the forest and enemies a-plenty, it is folly to keep an open gate. ‘The man who walks barefoot does not plant thorns.’”

“Have you been talking to Svein to be learning his tired saws?” Morca asked. He called up the stair. “Svein, have you and Oliver been hunched together?”

“No, Morca,” said Svein from the dark at the top of the stair. “But for once, your foreign man is right. Soren is a Farthing. His great-grandfather was your uncle’s enemy. It is folly to let a man like that come and go.”

“Enough of this,” Morca said. “I will have my way. Hey, Haldane, you are hurt. You are wounded. Did she bite you?”

Haldane touched the bloody cut above his wrist, “She stung me only, but I have pulled her fang.”

He reached behind him and brought out her knife. He flipped it in his hand and caught it by its well-worn black leather haft.

Morca roared at that. “I told you she had spirit. Your first war wound. When you have her in your marriage bed you can trade her stroke for stroke and wound for wound.”

But Haldane’s tongue knew his first war wound better. It touched the rough edge of his chipped tooth. His life was a knot, a chaos of wants and fears, but at the moment he was sure of one thing.

“I have no wish to marry this fat little foreign girl, father,” Haldane said. “She does not know Garmund from Garulf.”

“You have no wish,” said Morca. “My wish is your wish, and my wish is that you marry.”

The moment of certainty passed. Morca stared at his son so dominantly that the boy’s resolve broke and drained away.

“Hear me all of you!” Morca shouted. “I want no more argument. It is settled now! The sealing will be a week tomorrow and that is the end of it.”

Haldane said, "Bath night." His submission.

Morca said, "Is it? So it is. We'll have our baths in that morning, before the betrothal." His acceptance.

"But first we have to speak with Furd Heavyhand. Make yourself ready, Haldane. We ride to find him come morning."

Chapter 7

The banquet in celebration of the betrothal of Princess Marthe, youngest and dearest to Lothor of Chastain of all his daughters, a child whose father's fathers were Jehannes and the Three Kings of Nestria, but whose mother's mothers were even older, to Lord Haldane, son and second to Black Morca, who would be a prince if the Gets had princes, was an early success. Men drank from full stoups and ate from full plates in the same great hall where they had bathed in the morning and witnessed the beginning of an epic in the afternoon. The banquet was the capstone of the day.

An ox fit for best guests turned over one fire. On the other spit hung a wild boar returned by Ivor Fish-Eye's hunters. The chief tumult of platter filling was over and men were well settled to their meat and drink.

The dowry Morca had brought back from Chastain as his price for allowing his son to marry the Princess Marthe lay on display before the dais. All but the great doors, which had been fitted and hung while Morca pursued his business with Furd Heavyhand. Men admired the treasure for its bulk and Morca for his nerve. Morca Bride-Stealer. Ho, ho. At his work again.

From his great chair at the table on the dais Morca could see his new doors. He ate beef and sopped his plate with bread. He wore pink ribands braided in his beard for the occasion.

At the table with Morca were other great people. At Morca's right hand, telling him stories to keep him amused, was Oliver, his strange and formidable maker of magic, visible evidence for all the room of Morca's control of powerful forces. Oliver had shed his usual serviceable red woolen for magenta robes of cloth that dazzled the eye.

At Morca's left hand was Lothor of Chastain, cloaked in blue brocade. He pecked at his food and did not laugh at Oliver's stories,

even though they were told in Nestorian. He was without his dog tonight, but between bites he fondled the scepter that lay beside his plate, symbol of the slender power of Chastain, as he always did in the presence of the Gets.

Between Lothor and Haldane sat Princess Marthe, the only woman who ate in all the room. Morca had allowed her to eat this meal at the table to give Lothor reason to leave lighthearted. Marthe wore pale blue and white, the colors of ice. Like her father, she was silent except when addressed.

Haldane sat in Morca's second chair, brought downstairs from Morca's quarters. He cut Marthe's pork for her with a new narrow knife he had. His chair, much smaller than Morca's, framed him neatly. Morca had given it to him after the betrothal. Like so much else that had happened in this last week, it was evidence of his father's favor.

Barons and carls and knights of Chastain spilled ale on the rushes and stuffed their guts with meat and savory kitchen dishes. A serving woman carried a trencher new-brought from the kitchen to Svein All-White All-Wrong on his stair and let the oldster breach the pottage. At the next table, Rolf the carl sat with his again friend Ludbert, who had gambled for his fork and won. The fork had a new owner now and these two ate with their knives, spoons, and fingers like regular Gets.

Elsewhere, together sat Soren Seed-Sower and Furd Heavyhand, both Morca's men now. They ate bite for bite and drank drink for drink and haggled bride price. Companions at another table were Ivor Fish-Eye, eating of the boar his party had taken while they hunted the wurox but found only its stone turds, and Aella of Long Barrow. Aella had returned to Morca's dun as he had promised. If he had been too late for bath and betrothal, pell-melling up just before the gates were to be closed at nightfall, he had yet been in time for the banquet.

And at the end of the table below Haldane sat Hemming, his army, keeping him constant company with his eye. When Haldane—son, Get, story prince, new baron, new washed, new clothed, new betrothed, well filled and happy—set forth for the outhouse half through the banquet to relieve himself of too much ale and excitement, Hemming Paleface rose and followed at his heels through Morca's splendid new doors and into the night.

Haldane stepped off the porch and into the yard. He breathed the comfort of the night. The air was cool after the close warmth of

the hall, and smelled of the living spring. The wind whistled light nonsense through the stockade walls, her merry syrinx. It was a gay time to be alive. The crescent moon had bedded early and the stars were lightly veiled. It was quiet here. The voices within were muffled by the new doors.

“Well, where are we to?” asked Hemming Paleface at Haldane’s elbow.

Haldane clapped him on the shoulder. Fiercely, he said, “We are off to the outhouse. Are you game to try, though they be as thick as sand fleas all about us?”

“Who?” asked simple Hemming.

“Why, the enemy. The enemy.” Haldane put his hand to his sword. “Will you strike down any man who prevents us from our goal?”

Hemming laughed and nodded. “My head is giddy from craning and from drinking black ale, but you are my captain, Haldane. I will have their lives for you. Oh, it is good to be a Get tonight!”

Haldane and his army bared their swords and rushed through the yard striking singing giant blows that could not be parried. They laughed and Hemming fell and they slew the night many times before Haldane had Hemming on his feet again and they won through to the outhouse and safety. They collapsed against the walls and hungered for breath. For a Get who was half a Nestorian, Hemming was a good Get.

“My sides ache so much I am near to puking,” said Haldane. “I can’t take this. I must stop laughing. Oh, I am dizzy.”

“I owe you my life,” said Hemming. “If not for you, I would have been slain where I fell.”

Haldane waved it away. “It was nothing. You may have chance someday to serve me like.”

The guard in the tower nearby at the corner of the stockade called to find what the hurly was about. They were laughing so loud that his call was lost and he must needs call again.

“Enough,” said Haldane to Hemming. “We must be sober.” He raised his voice in answer. “It is nothing. We are funning. We fight bogies.”

“How goes the feast?”

“Drunk. Can we send you ale or meat?”

“Na. No need. I have eaten and I expect my relief at the first moment.”

The two young Gets passed inside the outhouse to seek their own relief. When they were pissed dry, their heads were clearer. As

they shook themselves and straightened their clothes, Haldane said, "Come early summer when Lothor is back in Dunbar, Morca and I mean to go raping in Chastain. There is a place in the party for you, Hemming."

Hemming had no chance to reply. As they left the outhouse, there were two men on the path. They were knights of Chastain, Lothor's men, quietly drunk for such a gay banquet. One waved a wineskin, the other a sword. They lacked only dice to be ready to duel any man they met on his own terms.

He with the wineskin said, "Hold!" and waved his hand before his companion's face. "Put your sword by. It is Lord Haldane and his man. They wait you inside to toast your betrothal, young lord."

"Did you expect to meet a goblin in the night?" asked Haldane in Nestorian. Though all of Lothor's knights seemed as much alike to him in their sameness as any handful of chicken feed, he thought he knew these two. They were the patient adventurers who had gone hunting each day with Ivor Fish-Eye.

"Oh. Yes, goblins. Nestor is full of goblins, but we are well protected. Here, drink of our wine and arm yourselves for the walk back to the hall. It is a far distance you have come without protection. Our southern wine is proof against any horror of the night."

And in truth Haldane's head was ready to be rung again. The skin was passed from hand to hand. The wine was warming.

When the knight of Chastain had drunk, he offered the skin again to Haldane. "Here. Another drink on your marriage."

"No," said Haldane. "I am just right now."

"I will drink," said Hemming. "To you, my Haldane, my leader." He saluted Haldane and drank. Then he passed the skin back to the foreign knight.

"The field is yours," said Haldane, and they left the outhouse to the strangers.

The torches in Morca's hall flared brightly in their rings on the smoke stained columns, sending licking lights across the revelry. The air was close and warm, smelling of meat and men. There were songs and jokes and calls from table to table. As Haldane and Hemming stood in the door, making room for another of Lothor's men to pass outside, Fat Netta, one of the serving women, slipped on a discarded bone before their eyes. She dropped heavily on her round bottom and her pitcher flew from her hands to drench a carl in ale. He cursed heartily and swung around while men roared. He snatched her up

and kissed her soundly, though she was as old as Morca and no prettier. She clouted him with her pitcher and retreated to the kitchen.

"Bring more ale," the carl called after her. "Earn another kiss."

The calm and quiet of the night were well enough, but this was where the excitement was. It was good to be back in the midst of things. On this night, it was good to be the son of Black Morca. This night, in particular.

Haldane strode the aisle between the tables, feeling tall, feeling himself grown and ready for marriage, war and command, and all the other things of being a man and a Get. He was stopped by Rolf's reaching hand thrust out before him. The old carl swung around on his bench, licking his gravy-sopped fingers.

"Aye, don't you look good in your new clothes," he said. "You've grown fine, little Haldane Hardhead. You'll be earning yourself a new name next, and then I won't know you. To think, you a baron now, with men of your own, and I the man who taught you to sit a horse and string a bow."

"Hey, it's not so bad," Haldane said. "There is no need to cry."

Rolf shook his head. The drink he had taken made him soft. "Time passes. That's all, time passes." And then he said, "Here, a present for you. For your wedding." And he thrust his cord on Haldane, the beautiful string he had brought with him from Chastain. And Haldane could not say no.

Haldane said, "Morca has promised me more men now. I can have my choice if I ask for it. I will. Shall I ask him for you? I would like you to be one of my own men."

Rolf was touched. "Oh, aye. Aye. Ask him." He controlled his voice with difficulty and wiped his nose with his knuckle.

Then he said, "I've been stealing looks at your partridge princess. She's strange, but she's not so strange that she can't be improved. Just remember, boy—'It's bit and spur that make a horse jump.' Swive her well and she will be a Get in no time."

His friend Ludbert beside him said, "Will you teach him that too?" And ducked away from Rolf's hand.

Haldane Bridegroom made his way to the dais and sat down again in his chair. His own chair. He was not yet accustomed to having a back to rest against and an arm to lean on, but he liked the chair well. It made him proud and happy. In the frame of the chair, he felt himself the picture of Morca's heir.

But after a single bite of meat grown cold, he leaned forward to see past the lesser part of his epic, eating her last meal here on the

dais. Not eating. There was a slice of beef untouched lying atop the pork that he had been good enough to cut for her since she was too dainty to use her hands and he would not give her knife back to let her cut him again as she had threatened. Marthe's head hung over her plate and her hands were tucked away in her lap.

Haldane said, "What have I missed while I was gone?" He wished to know what pleasures he had traded for his swallow of Chastain wine.

"Ah," Morca said in Nestorian. "I was asking your bride if it is true that she cannot tell Garulf from Garmund. It is true. She has no answer. You have much to teach her, Haldane. Start with that."

The plump child princess shook her head dumbly. She turned her head away from Morca into her shoulder.

"It is easy," Haldane said to the buried face. "Garmund was my grandfather. He was king. Garulf was his brother. He was king before Garmund."

"There you are!" said Morca. "It is as easy as that."

But the girl did not look up. She seemed ready to cry. Where was her fire now? Haldane was disgusted. As soon as Lothor was safely gone, he would take her away to a private room and shut the door behind her.

Lothor glanced up then, tapped the hard knob of his stick against palm and gestured with it, speaking in his whip-thin voice:

"They are right," he said. "You remember the Three Kings of Nestria without confusion, my child. Garulf and Garmund are as easy as Leon, Leonus, and Leonidus. Garulf was he that we killed at Stone Heath and left for crows to pick over. Garmund was the other. He would sneak secretly into the West, rob and burn, and slip away. Like Morca, his son. Can you remember that? It is simplicity itself."

Marthe nodded without words. Haldane was thunderstruck by Lothor's presumption. Oliver could only stare.

But Black Morca was so angered by these words of Lothor's that he slammed the tableboard with his fist and made the dishes dance. Morca was so angered that he could not speak. The ribands in his beard quivered. He struck the table again and again until it rang like a bell and came nigh to cracking. A platter fell to the floor spilling good meat and juices amidst the rush cover. The room stilled and all eyes turned to Morca at these evidences of his wrath.

Oliver was the first who was able to speak through the silence that followed. He said, "You speak bravely for one so far from home.

An I were you, I would shave my tongue and be content to leave it unwagged until the hair grew back. Or I were safe again in Chastain.”

“But you are not me, fat man,” said Lothor of Chastain. “And I am no barefoot wizard piddling with dinner magic, Jan be thanked. Nor am I a bride-thief barbarian king. The time has come for all of us to show ourselves. We are what we are. And there am I.”

He pointed to the doorway and Morca’s eye followed, as Haldane had looked after the witch Jael’s misleading hand. The new doors, once Lothor’s, now Morca’s, stood wide-flung. The room silenced. In the doorway stood two Get barons, Egil Two-Fist and Coughing Romund, no friends to Morca. Behind them was a press of men, Get barons and carls. And Lothor’s knights of Chastain, naked swords in hand, fresh come from killing the watch and throwing open the gates. Romund coughed in the silence and then they were pouring into the room, all sober and intent on ending Morca’s pretensions in one stroke.

Old Svein Half-White Half-Right on his staircase stood and threw down his dinner. He yelled, “Up! Up! Morca, we are undone! Your ambitions have brought fire down on us!”

As Morca looked to the doorway and the attackers, Lothor seized Morca’s black beard in tight laced fingers and brought the power of Chastain down on Morca’s head. But bull Morca’s chief strength was sturdier than Lothor’s stick. The scepter broke with the second blow and Morca’s head did not.

Morca reared, his great heavy chair toppling backward slowly. No one else in the world could have disturbed it so lightly. He dragged Lothor to his feet by his beard-tangled fingers. Then Morca swung his great arm and stumbling Lothor of Chastain was knocked to the floor senseless. Morca was a strong man.

Black Morca spread his arms wide and in his bull bellow he cried, “For your lives and for Morca! *Alf Morca Gettha!*”

Men thrilled to the sound of his voice. With his slogan still ringing, Morca drew his sword. He placed a foot on Lothor to steady him and split him like a log on the chopping block. The Princess Marthe screamed to see her father so sudden dead. With one great hand Morca the War King upset the tableboard before him, dishes flying, kicked the golden dowry of Chastain out of his way, and strode down to the cutting floor red sword in hand to wade in blood.

In the first moment, men stood throughout the room shaking the fog from their heads and the meat from their poniards. They drew their swords and turned to meet the killing tide. They franti-

cally tried to sort friend from foe. They were far outnumbered and shock, dismay, and gorged bellies made them slow.

Soren Seed-Sower and Furd Heavyhand, their quarrel forgot, stood together side by side to face the weight of onslaught. They met it and held, fighting like true Gets, like true loyal men. Then they were overwhelmed and they died. They were only the first.

There was no quarter here. Egil, Heregar the Headstrong, and the rest who came through the doors, Lothor's knights who followed, and Aella and Ivor, the traitors within, meant to kill every man.

Old Svein on his stair, no fighting man for twenty years, turned and scrambled upstairs for his stool. But not to sit, not to cower. He gripped his stool with his left arm as a shield and with his eating knife as his weapon he strove to hold the stair. It was all he knew to do. And hold the stair he did against all attackers, turning them back in ones, twos, and threes. They could not bring him down. Then Aella of Long Barrow, that man, leapt up from beside the stair and seized the old man's ankles and toppled him. Aella set his knee on Svein's thin old chest and showed him no mercy. He slit his throat in a stroke.

The room was bloody chaos, filled with shouts and slogans, cries of pain, and the groans of the felled as they were trampled and kicked by the standing. The torches leapt with the cool touch of night and the hot breath of battle, swaying to the surge of the dance of death, uncaring and unconcerned high above the fray. Some few of Morca's men sought to escape the maelstrom by following the screaming serving women within the kitchens or plunging through the doors into the night, but most stood their ground, falling back toward Morca when he bellowed his call, dying hard, earning their deaths by dealing death.

Morca was a giant. His sword was a circle of death for any who dared to close with him. He lifted fallen men to their feet. He inspired dead men to fight on. He was the center of the room. He was captain and king.

"Alf Morca Gettha!"

Haldane followed Morca down to the floor. He stood on his chair and stepped to the tabletop, for he did not have Morca's strength to push tables aside with a hand, and then he jumped down to the floor, banging one knee and rising with sword in hand.

"To me, Hemming. To me," he called, and Hemming Paleface came to him.

He and Hemming stood together and guarded each other's backs. Haldane was both thrilled and afraid. So this was battle! *At last*. At last. His heart resounded.

He knew their cause was dire, but how dire he did not realize. He did not know he was a dead man in his first battle with only the moment of his death undetermined. He had no time to think. He set aside his fear and fought.

He caught blows on his sword that numbed his arm and he dealt strokes that brought blood. He was wounded and did not feel the pain. His throat was raw from battle cries he never heard. There was the flavor of iron in his mouth. His sword was tight locked one moment and he tasted the ugly breath of the Get he fought, brown beard, yellow teeth, one dogtooth missing: Heregar the Headstrong. No, a smooth-shaven knight of Chastain. No, another Get. In other moments his sword's world was empty as far as it could reach. He braced his back against Hemming, his one support, and he braced Hemming in turn. When Morca called his slogan, he strove to reach the sound of his father's voice, Hemming following. And then, of a sudden, his back was empty.

Haldane was lying against something unyielding that pressed into his back and hurt him. He was kicked as he lay. His mind was a sickening whirlpool. Then he found himself on his knees. There was wetness running into his right eye and he cleared it with the back of his hand.

He wasn't sure where he was. What was happening? He was confused and sick. Before him on the rushes was a dead man. Blood ran from the dead man's nose and mouth and was clotted in his beard and mustache. Haldane knew him. Knew him? It was his dear old Rolf who had taught him to ride and shoot, now beyond any use of forks or strings. As dead as . . .

Everywhere around Haldane there was death. The room was full of dead men, Gets and foreigners. Everywhere around Haldane there was noise and tumult. War. The battle continued in knots, but everywhere many against few. And there lay Hemming Paleface dead, his head split, brains adribble.

Then Haldane recovered some of his mind. He knew where he was. He did not know what had happened to him, but he knew what was happening.

Black Morca still stood, but he stood alone. He had been wounded many times, the great bull beset by wolves. He bellowed in pain and he bellowed in fury, but he was dying bravely and his dangerous

horns kept the yapping giant killers at a distance. His sword sang a song of death and his poniard played harmony. But he was encircled and his end was close.

Haldane tried to come to his rescue, but he could not gain his feet. He crawled forward desperately over rushes and bodies and the scattered trash of the dowry, his dowry, dragging his sword with him. Then he saw Oliver a double armslength distant on the dais, crouched beneath a table. He was mumbling and moving his hands through the slow middle figures of a spell. And then Oliver stood, an eye-catching figure in his magenta robes, calling down the Chaining of Wild Lightning on their heads, the Ultimate Spell to kill the many, as the Gets had been slain at Stone Heath, that would kill himself, too, as the wizards of the West had perished with their triumph.

Haldane found himself mumbling too, the only spell he knew, the Pall of Darkness, as though by chanting his little spell he could be of aid to Oliver. He remembered the words, he remembered the motions of hand, and did not know how he remembered. And he hoped for magical deliverance. Anything that would save them.

Oliver made his gestures and said his words. He was magnificent, rising, growing, spreading, becoming great. The last figure was traced. The last word was spoken. He stood with arms spread, waiting for the white tongues of flame that would lash down and destroy the destroyers. Fire that would know whom to strike.

But no flame came.

Nothing happened. Nothing!

The fighting continued as though Oliver had not spoken a word.

And Black Morca was a dead man. The wolves closing, tightening their little circle, dragged down the great bull. They overbore him by weight of number. And the finishing strokes were made by Ivor Fish-Eye, the traitor. He waited his chance and when Morca was engaged he slipped in behind him and killed him with a knife thrice plunged into his back. Then he held the bloody knife high in exultation.

There were tears in Haldane's eyes and his mind was a morass. His whole world lay slain. Murdered. Dead.

He came at last to his feet, his lips moving through the last automatic mumble of the Pall of Darkness. He nearly fell. He stumbled against the dais. He finished the spell, leaning against a table. The old wave of cold he had known before rolled over him again. He was invisible to men's eyes, though the gods could see him still.

The carrion wolves set up a gay savage howl: "Black Morca is dead! Morca is slain! We have killed him!"

They pranced around the body of the fallen king and made much of themselves. They leaped in to hack at his bones. Men smeared themselves in his blood, painting their faces red with his death. They vied to cut off his parts and hold them up to show. Others turned to the scattered gold of the dowry, picking up prizes to keep.

But their work was not done. Egil Two-Fist, who led them, yelled, "Make sure of Morca's cub! He must be killed too. Find him."

That was Haldane. Haldane the Invisible. Haldane the Disappeared.

A sudden shattering hand fell on Haldane's shoulder.

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