

PART ONE - The Gathering

Market day. The town square was filled to overflowing. The crowd, elbow to elbow, jostled and surged first one way then another in the common pursuit of trade. A multitude of stalls topped by colourful canvas awnings displayed their various wares, the vendors shouting encouragement to prospective customers as they passed. Fresh fish from the bay, lamb and ox from the lush pastures of Terraverdi were haggled over with enthusiasm by goodwives, while merchants from far and wide traded wine, precious metals, costly silks and even, for the right price, information. A peddler, his handcart hung with pots and pans forced his way through the crowd entreating all around him to buy his wares; a gaily dressed gypsy held a group of ragged urchins enthralled as he performed sleight of hand trickery while elsewhere a balladeer cheerfully entertained the bustling crowd in the hope of earning a few copper coins for his supper.

Elbowing his way through the throng a Galalan soldier drew his share of muttered curses and indignant protests yet seemed not in the least affected by the stir his passage was causing. Armoured in leather and steel, long hair tied back in a queue with sword and axe swinging at his side, he strode purposefully onwards with little regard for those around him, his mind obviously elsewhere. Close on his heels several ragged street urchins followed in his wake, awestruck by his very appearance for soldiers, let alone mercenaries, were rarely seen on the streets of Missa. Yet mercenary he most definitely was, the obligatory single red epaulette on his left shoulder announcing his vocation to all.

Vin was thirty-three and had been soldiering for more than ten of those years, the last five as a mercenary. Before that, he had been a hunter and a skilled woodsman but circumstances had changed and the transition from killing game to killing men had proved to be not as difficult as it might have been. His most recent contract had expired only days before and he had immediately bought passage on a ship bound for his home state, Galala, but the barque had been storm-damaged on the run in from Trebac and had been forced to berth for repairs. That was how a Galalan mercenary came to find himself in Missa's town square on market day, causing a minor disturbance when all he wanted to do was find a tavern in which to lodge until he could continue his journey. He was aware that he was drawing a great deal of attention but he was hardly going to stop and explain his presence to the curious crowd. Let them wonder instead.

All at once he broke out of the seething mass of bodies and found himself in relatively free space at the eastern end of the square outside the church no more certain of his bearings than when he had set out. Catching a beggar-child by the arm as he dodged past, Vin drew a shining copper coin from his belt and held it up before the child.

"Is there a tavern nearby, lad?"

The grubby youngster eyed the soldier warily and the coin hungrily.

"Joyner's, mister. In Pig Alley."

He made a grab for the coin but Vin just as quickly closed his fist over the money.

"There's two more coppers if you'll show me the way."

The boy grinned hugely at the thought of such easily gained wealth and with sudden eagerness took the stranger by the hand and led the way.

"This way. It's not far."

Not far in the boy's terms translated into a five minute walk through a warren of streets and alleys so complex that Vin doubted that even with his soldier's instincts he would ever find his way out again without the assistance of a guide.

Pig Alley fortunately did not live up to its name and turned out to be a pleasant enough street of shops and dwellings with a tavern at one end identified by its painted sign as Joyner's Inn. Vin gladly doled out the three promised coppers and in the wink of an eye the boy was gone leaving him alone in the street.

The inn was quiet inside. A few obvious regulars sat at wooden benches supping mugs of ale and after a cursory glance in his direction continued their conversation without pause. The landlord, to his credit, asked no questions merely taking his money and showing him the way to a small, but comfortable room on the first floor.

"Supper's at seven, breakfast at six if you want it. Privy's out the back, just down those stairs." He pointed to a narrow stairway leading to the inn's courtyard. "There'll be no-one to disturb you here, sir."

Vin tipped him a half-crown as thanks and gratefully closed the door on the innkeeper's retreating back. Warily he removed his weapons and armour, then stripped off his shirt and poured water from the sturdy earthenware jug into the bowl. Quickly washing the travel-sweat from his body he gladly sank onto the bed which proved pleasingly soft after a hammock at sea and before that, the hard ground which had been more often than not his bed for the night. Without being aware of it he drifted into sleep.

He woke with a start, disoriented and more than a little confused. The room was dark and it took several pounding heartbeats to recall exactly where he was. That he had slept the day through was obvious although he had intended only to rest for a short time. Now it was full night and the tavern below was

quiet, that in itself suggesting the lateness of the hour. Silently he berated himself for falling asleep without even taking the most basic precaution of barring the door. A footfall outside on the landing jolted him into full awareness and his eye strayed to where his weapons lay carelessly discarded on the dresser on the other side of the room. A light scratching on the door drove him to his feet and he instinctively reached for the small blade he kept sheathed in his boot before moving noiselessly to the door. The noise was repeated, a little louder than before and Vin slipped warily to one side of the door frame before lifting the latch and allowing the door to swing open. Confronted by nothing more threatening than a serving wench with a lantern in one hand and balancing a tray in the other, he felt a little foolish as she stared in surprise at the drawn knife and quickly thrust it into his belt with a mumbled apology.

"Master thought you might like something to eat, sir, seeing as you missed supper."

Unbidden she crossed the threshold and set the lantern and the food down on the bare wooden table.

"It is only bread, cheese and some ale."

Vin realised then how ravenously hungry he was and without ceremony he sat down to eat. Fresh butter, and bread that was less than a day old! In the field any bread they managed to filch was usually stale and the customary fare for the common soldier was hard biscuits. The cheese was soft, ripe and creamy and he ate with relish the unaccustomed delicacy. As the food took the edge off his appetite he became aware of the wench's gaze fixed firmly on him, or rather the many scars that decorated his upper body, and unconsciously he caressed his most recent injury - barely healed and still tender - which arched over the right side of his chest and terminated in his armpit.

"You have seen many battles and have honourable wounds. You are good soldier?"

He paused in his chewing.

"If I was a good soldier I wouldn't have any wounds at all."

She frowned a little, as if puzzled by his reply.

"A man without battle scars is no man at all."

Vin looked at her with a mixture of amusement and interest. He judged her to be in her twenties and her accent betrayed her as Q'Ubbrian. Sloe-eyes and olive skin further indicated her eastern origins but unlike most of her race she was tall and slender suggesting some cross-cultural liaison in her ancestry.

"What's your name?"

"Inez."

"Well, Inez, if bravery is judged by the number of scars a man carries then I must be one heroic son-of-a-bitch."

She lowered her eyes and poured him a tankard of ale.

"Now you only make fun of Inez."

He suppressed a smile.

"No, but because I've been on the wrong end of a sword doesn't mean I'm better than the next man."

She moved a step closer and lightly traced her fingertips across a deep scar in the muscle of his shoulder.

"I think that you are not like other soldiers. You do not wear your scars like a badge to prove your manhood, but you are a soldier for hire, so you like to fight? To kill?"

"It's what I do best," he pointed out reasonably as he finished the last of the cheese, "and I do it to make money in the hope that I can live to enjoy it."

The girl frowned again and looked directly into his eyes.

"No. I do not believe that you do it just for money. It is your destiny. You were born to be a great warrior."

Vin smiled openly this time at her decisiveness.

"Alright," he agreed, "So it's my destiny to be a soldier."

She returned his smile, nodding slowly.

"As it is my destiny to be a serving girl."

Collecting the tray and lantern she cheekily bobbed a curtsy and swept out of the room.

Rising from the chair, Vin crossed to the window and leaned on the sill looking out over the rooftops of the sleeping town, considering her words. Born to be a warrior? If that meant having a talent for killing

others maybe he was but he knew above all else that his being a soldier stemmed more from the fact that it was the only legitimate outlet for his particular abilities.

The town proved no less confusing the next day when Vin ventured out into the streets in the hope of replenishing his supplies. At that moment everything he owned was on his back. He possessed nothing but his weapons, his armour and his clothing but he had gold and coin to spare. Now all he had to do was find the merchants who would gladly relieve him of that wealth.

More by chance than skill he discovered a smithy in an unmarked lane and he left his sword to have an edge put on it before being directed by the armourer to his next destination. He spent a pleasant morning wandering through the town, a man with time on his hands until, finally bored, he decided to make his way back to the smith on the off chance that the work on his sword might be completed and he could return to the inn. Finding the forge proved more difficult than he anticipated and after only a short time he realised that once again he was lost within the complicated maze of narrow, unnamed lanes and alleys. Even at midday these lanes were dark, sheltered from the sun by their overhanging eaves and listing upper storeys. Cursing softly he turned to retrace his steps and found his passage blocked by a gang of thugs and ruffians who had silently materialised from the shadows. Vin reacted with the speed of training that initially put his attackers off balance but by strength of numbers they succeeded in bearing him to the ground, kicking, punching and biting in an effort to subdue him. A moment's respite allowed him to grasp the knife concealed in his boot after which he was able to make a more than satisfactory showing. Within minutes he had retired several from the fight but there were enough remaining to gradually overpower him and he found himself disarmed and forced to his knees with his arms expertly pinioned behind his back. One footpad relieved him of his axe and armour, a second lifted his belt and money pouch while the third, evidently the leader, oversaw the proceedings armed now with Vin's own dirk.

"That's all he's got," announced a roughly accented voice after a thorough search.

The leader motioned with the knife and Vin was dragged to his feet, the pressure on his shoulder joints intensifying as his captor kept a firm grip on his arms.

"What a sorry sight you are, sir. You should be careful whose company you keep, you know," he warned sagely, then laughed uproariously, "Here's your blade back, you might need it to protect yourself against villains!"

Vin should have expected what came next but, nose streaming blood, he was finding it difficult enough to keep his eyes focused so when the coup de grace came it caught him by surprise. The leader stepped forward until he stood toe to toe with the disarmed soldier, then delivered an almost lethargic

thrust with his right hand towards Vin's unprotected belly. Pain radiated throughout his body and looking down the soldier suddenly understood. The bone handle of his dirk protruded from his hip turning his blood to ice. Released without warning from the grip that was keeping him upright he sank to his knees again and sensed rather than heard his assailants flee. Breathing heavily he leaned forward and with a muted cry eased out the blade, feeling the decidedly unpleasant sensation of warm blood flowing inside his clothing. With a grunt he pushed himself to his feet clutching the wound with a bloodied hand, and forced himself to walk knowing that to lie down in these unsavoury quarters would mean certain death.

How he found his way back to Joyner's Inn he never really knew but some time later he stumbled into the courtyard all but spent and his consciousness beginning to grey as loss of blood began to take its toll. Inez, drawing water at the well, regarded him with mild curiosity as he crossed the yard with the reeling gait of a drunkard but all her misgivings evaporated when she noticed the blood on him. Dropping the partially filled bucket to clatter noisily on the cobblestones she ran to his aid and allowing the soldier to lean heavily on her slight frame she screamed for the innkeeper. Every step a monumental effort Vin forced himself to keep moving until once over the threshold of his room, with his last reserves of strength drained, he crashed to the floor insensible.

Some hours later he broke through the delirium of fever to the reality of pain that seemed to consume his entire body and found himself surrounded by strangers. A peculiar though not unpleasant odour filled the room and someone pressed a cup to his lips forcing a bitter brew down his throat. Without losing consciousness he slipped instead into a relatively pain-free doze, soothed by the murmuring voices that continued to ebb and flow around him.

Inez straightened and looked from one to the other of those assembled in the room.

"Well?" The single word was uttered with some impatience by a tall, heavy set, bearded man dressed in the simple robes of a tree-priest.

Inez glanced once more at the injured man and nodded.

"He is the one. I am sure of it."

The tree-priest stepped forward and stared intently at the sleeping figure on the bed for several minutes.

"You must be certain, Inez. There can be no mistake!"

"Josiah, I cannot change what is written. This must be the one we have been waiting for."

The man sighed heavily.

"Then so be it. The prophesy is fulfilled."

He passed his staff twice over the young mercenary as he muttered a few words in the ancient tongue of the Druids. The staff flared once with a bluish light and Josiah turned to leave.

"Bring him to me when he is well, Inez. Come, Jeh-di, we have much work to do."

Followed by his young apprentice the mage swept out of the room in a swirl of robes and was gone in a moment.

Inez turned to the dark skinned man still standing at the foot of the bed.

"My thanks, apothecary. Your help is much appreciated."

Bowing once he took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"It is an honour to serve a priestess of the True Faith, my Lady."

She inclined her head and smiled.

"My faithful Nathan. What has passed here tonight must go no further than these four walls."

"You have my oath. Now I must be on my way Lady Inez, but I will return in two days time."

"My blessing, Nathan. Go in peace."

"Stay in peace, my lady."

The apothecary quietly closed the door behind him and Inez moved quickly to slip the bar into place securing the door against unwelcome visitors then with a rustle of silken robes she sat gently on the edge of the bed.

"Sleep well my soldier," she whispered, "you do not know it yet but your future has been written in the stars and now is the time to fulfil your destiny. The prophecy has begun to unfold."

When he next opened his eyes the shutters on the window were closed and a single lamp burned nearby. He stirred experimentally catching his breath as a stab of pain lanced through his side.

"Don't move. You will start the bleeding again."

He smiled as he recognised the voice. Inez. She moved into the light and with a cool cloth smelling faintly of herbs bathed his face.

"How long have I..." His voice was a whisper.

"It has been two turns of the sun since you found Inez at the well."

Two days!

"I can't believe I was caught by common cut throats!" He was thinking aloud more than talking to the girl, his bitterness evident.

"It is no shame. You do not know these parts or our ways. It is easy for a stranger to fall victim to these *taksha*."

Recalling their first conversation he could not resist a jibe.

"And you still think I'm brave?"

Inez considered carefully before she replied, tilting her head as she appraised him.

"You *do* have another scar."

The man sat relaxed astride the rangy gelding and looked down the valley at the distant spires of Almera Tor, the seat of power for Almaric, secure behind its fortified walls. The tor was rumoured to be impregnable, surrounded as it was by rivers on two sides and a sheer cliff on a third. Yet the same had been said of Umala'h and hadn't he just seen that fall to the Eastern menace? He turned his horse northwards and kicked the tired beast into motion. He had business elsewhere but he hoped that Almaric would fare better than its neighbours against the barbarian horde flowing out of the East. He rode into Missa two days later relieved to find that nothing about the town had changed, but knowing that the information he carried would change it forever.

Gauleiter Bekk stared thoughtfully from his second storey window overlooking the town square before slowly turning back to face his council. Twelve men waited expectantly for him to speak, bland faces reflecting malleable minds, and Bekk understood that he alone was supposed to make a decision. As the silence grew in length, individual councillors began to shift uncomfortably, until after several more minutes the gauleiter decided to put them out of their collective misery.

"These are difficult times we face. You have heard the reports from Q'Ubbri and Keloria, and I believe that the threat from Ragnatha is real. Their armies are on the move and it is only a matter of time before Almaric itself will be forced to defend its borders; something that has not happened in many years. Let me make this clear however; we are not prepared for war."

"Surely we have the resources..." began Trimbald Metz, the treasurer.

"Metz," interrupted the gauleiter, "you, more than anyone, should know that we don't have the resources necessary to undertake a lengthy conflict. The Ragnathan's have been ready to do battle for a decade, while we have spent our time making vast amounts of money through trade; Keloria and Q'Ubbri have spent ten years protecting our borders and keeping the peace but even they will tell you of the constant border skirmishes between their united forces and Ragnatha."

"Then what is to be done?"

"Missa is going to need an army. We have some time yet and our coffers are full."

"You are talking of a mercenary force I presume?"

This from a slightly built man in his early forties who reclined easily in his chair and spoke in a cultured accent, which Bekk thought privately made him sound as if he had a mouth full of pebbles.

"Your presumption is correct, Master Rollo. Where else are we to find trained soldiers at a moment's notice?"

Rollo inclined his head in deference to the point being made and steepled his fingers in a familiar gesture which Bekk knew to be the prelude to a lengthy diatribe. Purposely he turned away and addressed the fourteenth man in the room, unshaven and still dressed in his travelling clothes, his features drawn and haggard from an obviously rough journey.

"And you, Ezra Standish, what is your opinion in this? You have first hand experience."

Standish lounged idly in a chair to one side of the great hall, dozing in the heat. His eyes remained closed as he answered.

"You have all heard my report and know as much as I know. The Ragnathan's are mobilising. We have no army. My job is over, now yours begins."

"But you do have some ideas of your own?" prompted Rollo.

Standish sat up in his chair at last and slowly looked from one man to the next, his startling green eyes burning in hollowed sockets.

"My advice to all of you is to pack up your things and leave on the next vessel out of Missa. Lord Gris and his armies will sweep through Almarac like reapers through the harvest wheat, and I for one would not care to be one of the survivors. Those who die in the first invasion will be the lucky ones. Now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I need a bath!"

Without another moment's hesitation the Ranger rose and with a courtly bow turned on his heel and strode out of the hall, leaving thirteen shocked and fearful men in his wake.

Joyner's Inn rang with the sound of merrymaking; a cacophony of laughter and loud conversation as customers struggled to be heard over the noise and creating more in the process. Serving wenches threaded their skilful way among the patrons armed with foaming tankards and platters of hot food avoiding groping hands and lewd suggestions with an equanimity that offended no-one. In one corner a noisy group rolled dice from a leather cup, coppers changing hands at a rapid rate while across the room a quiet but intense game of darts was in progress. In other words, a normal Saturday night at Joyner's.

Sitting alone in one corner, Vin watched the activities with amusement as he sipped his ale. Every now and then Inez would glide across to his table to make sure that he was comfortable, unconvinced that he had recovered sufficiently from his wound to be left unattended for too long. His protests that he felt fine continued to fall on deaf ears. His wound had healed with unnatural speed following the prompt ministrations of the apothecary and he suspected, although Inez refused to confirm it, the added skills of a mage. He no longer had any real excuse for staying in Missa but at the same time he could now find no pressing need to rush back to Galala. After all he had no immediate family there but he had always returned to his homeland between his stints in one army or another. For now he was finding Missa a tolerable place to be, although he had to admit even to himself that the main reason behind his lingering in the town was probably Inez. She had staked some sort of claim on him if not from their first meeting then certainly since he had staggered back to the inn bloodied and hurt. Not that her attentions were unwelcome, after all she had nursed him back to health and she was after all a beautiful woman. Vin would have been the last to admit it but the simple truth was that he was beginning to get used to the home life and for the first time in many years thoughts of fighting were far from his mind.

Ezra Standish luxuriated in the deep tub of hot, scented water, his first bath in days and found the experience was restoring some of his innate good humour. He slid beneath the surface of the water, totally immersing himself then came up blowing like a whale as he cleared his nostrils and shook his

dripping hair. One of the bathhouse wenches appeared for a moment and left him shaving equipment and a towel before withdrawing with a come-hither smile and a flash of shapely leg as she twitched her skirt aside to avoid the water pooling by the door. Standish grinned as he lathered his face and tested the blade of the straightedge razor. Here he was, the wrong side of thirty and a seventeen year old slut was giving him the come-on. He squinted into the mirror wondering if she could see something that he couldn't but his reflection showed only the same green-eyed, smoothly tanned features he was used to. With a mental shrug he drew his cheek taut and began to shave.

He emerged from the bathhouse some time later, clean shaven and with his hair dressed and combed. Even his clothes had been laundered as he bathed, changing his appearance dramatically from the travel-weary scout who had ridden into Missa only hours before. Without hesitation he strode purposefully across the street soon disappearing into the warren of narrow alleys that proliferated behind the neat facade of the town proper with no apparent design or regard for architectural style. On both sides of the central gutter mean, two-roomed hovels nestled together, the distance between the opposing rows barely more than Ezra's outstretched arms. Careless of the rats that scuttled away at his approach and the stench from the open sewer he continued past groups of sullen-faced men and hard-eyed women until he reached one particular dwelling, even more mean than its neighbours, at the end of a cul-de-sac. After knocking sharply at the stout oakwood door he stepped back to peer up at the single, dirty window in the upper storey. Muted sounds came from within but no-one opened the door. Standish hammered once more against the wood.

"Folly! You thieving little worm. Open this door before I kick it down! Is this the way to welcome a visitor?"

A moment later he heard the sound of the door being unlatched and a diminutive figure cautiously showed himself at the opening before swinging the door wide in welcome.

"It's yourself then Ezra, been gone these long months with never a word and now hammering fit to smash the door in! Well, don't just stand there, boy! Come in and have a brew."

The Ranger while only of middling height himself had to duck his head to clear the lintel as he followed the still chattering Folly into the house.

"Three months since we seen you last. How goes it with you? Sit and tell us what's the word from away."

Folly was an unrepentent rogue, thief and fence but while he earned his keep from relieving unsuspecting citizens of their petty cash there was no malice in him and he was a likeable fellow. As far as Ezra knew Folly was his only name certainly he had never heard him addressed by any other and his exact origins

remained shrouded in mystery. He spoke a variety of tongues and seemed equally at ease whether he spoke in the courtly High Almaric or in the colourful thief's cant of which he was a master. Standish found him to be an endless source of entertainment but more importantly this particular rogue was a mine of information and it was for this purpose that the Ranger had sought him out today.

"I suspect you already know where I've been, if not I can only say you must be losing your touch!"

Folly grinned broadly and tapped one side of his nose with his index finger.

"Details, Ezra, is what we're after."

Although he spoke in the plural Folly had no company other than Standish; he habitually referred to himself that way.

The Ranger turned one of the roughly hewn chairs around and sat astride it with his arms resting across the back, while the little man - all of five feet tall - fetched glasses and a dusty brown bottle. Ezra accepted a glass of the potent Karak, a Galalan spirit distilled from turnips, potato and juniper, and sculled the fiery alcohol in the customary fashion.

"Q'Ubbri has fallen to Ragnatha then?" continued the diminutive thief.

It didn't surprise Standish that Folly was already aware of the news, but it always astounded him that without leaving Missa the little man could discover information that Ezra himself had taken three months of hard and often dangerous work to glean.

"Aye. All but the mountain strongholds and I'll warrant they'll not fall so easily. I would have given six months before the border towns fell but the Ragnathan's seem to be unstoppable. Lord Gris won't give up this time until he possesses all the land between Adulonggi and the Isbuhl."

"And Keloria? How fare our allies in the north?"

"Holding, but they're concentrating their defences on the Uppstra River and around Yprasta. Kippasala has already taken up arms against Ragnatha'um in the Fjord Garu, but the fighting has not yet reached the land."

"What say our illustrious city elders to this?"

Standish held out his glass for another shot of the fiery spirit.

"Bekk talks of raising a mercenary army."

Folly shook his head.

"No time. No time. If Ragnatha moves as fast as you say, Almara Tor will be under siege in a matter of weeks."

The Ranger nodded slowly in agreement.

"Almaric will now have to pay the price for not believing that Ragnatha would rise again. The signs have been there for these past five years or more but we became complacent while enjoying our wealth and our peace. Now Almaric has no military power, our only army is the garrison at the Tor, and with this we are expected to meet an army of 100,000!"

The thief leaned forward as if afraid he might be overheard.

"It is rumoured that Lord Gris has a powerful ally. Some say he has found a Seer."

Standish fastened his gaze on the rogue, estimating the extent of Folly's knowledge.

"Mind your words, Folly. Take care of what you speak."

The thief relaxed and leaned back in his chair.

"There is truth in this then?"

Ezra set down his glass.

"I was hoping that you could tell me."

"We are not a diviner, boy. We pick up some information here, a rumour there and sometimes when we add two and two together we come up with four. In these times it is not easy to separate fact from folly and news from the east is becoming scarce. Soon we will be in the dark as much as the next man."

"Then we are in the same boat, my friend."

Folly downed his third glass of karak.

"And both of us without an oar!" He laughed uproariously and slapped Standish on the shoulder. "No doubt we will both sink together, a pair of reprobates to the end."

Ezra found it hard to share Folly's obvious amusement, for in his mind he could still see the burned forest of Falla with its blackened trees grotesquely decorated with human ornaments swinging from the branches.

The sky had the appearance of an old bruise, muted shades of purple and black tinged with yellow. The sun had retreated behind the banks of roiling clouds so, although it was close to noon, it was dark and gloomy across the vast plains of Tolbu. A herd of wild horses milled restlessly, moving first one way then turning in confusion to double back upon itself not knowing which way to run. To the East the clouds blackened menacingly and dust boiled on the horizon, while an indefinable sense of menace permeated the very air. A shattering peal of thunder echoed from the hills as a jagged fork of lightning split the sky, striking a grove of elms and turning the trees into a blazing inferno. With a scream of alarm and fury the stallion leading the herd reared, his hooves pawing the air, and wheeled to the west charging furiously away from the approaching storm, his mares following in panic.

Far to the East, moving inexorably westwards the army of the Ragnathan emperor, Lord Gris, advanced crushing everything in its path. Unprepared for war the towns and villages of eastern Almaric fell with little or no resistance. The men, old women and children were put to the sword, a kinder fate than that which befell the younger females who were forced to become slaves of the Ragnathan soldiers else be put to death. Many chose the latter.

The forces of Lord Gris rolled across the land like a juggernaut, seemingly unstoppable and in the fortress stronghold of Almara Tor the King of Almaric pondered the fate of his kingdom, a very worried man.

Queen Lanissa watched her husband pace the room deep in thought as he considered the latest news brought to him from the Tolbu River settlement only five hundred leagues from their own keep.

"Anselm? Are we safe here at the Tor?"

The king glanced up at his wife and hurried to her side.

"Forgive me Lanissa. I cannot guarantee even our own safety against this threat. The Tor has never been taken but..." He shrugged, unable to continue.

"We have the garrison to protect us, for a little while at least," soothed the Queen, "but what of our people? What is their defence against this menace?"

Anselm turned to stare out of the palace window.

"They have none."

Lanissa rose slowly from her chair and joined her husband in looking at the magnificent view of the Tolbu Valley.

"Surely we are not to desert them at such a time?"

The king reached out to take his wife's hands in his own.

"No, my love. I am sending half the garrison out in the hope of being able to raise a force against Ragnatha and make a stand, but I fear that it will be but a useless gesture. We are unprepared for war and Lord Gris has moved faster than anyone would have believed possible. We have no time left."

"Can we not hope for help from our allies?"

"I have already sent word to Grossak, Julala and Pellinna but I doubt that they can get here in time. We can only pray for their assistance. For the moment only Keloria and ourselves remain unconquered on this entire continent."

"But we will fight?"

"Yes," sighed Anselm turning away once more, "For what it is worth, we will fight."

The young page hovered hesitantly in the candlelit gloom of the inner sanctum, torn between the necessity of delivering his message and the reluctance to disturb the knight who knelt, head bent, before the altar. A hand reached out of the shadows and gripped his arm.

"What do you want?" hissed a disembodied voice.

"A message for Sir Christiaan," stammered the youth.

A figure materialised from behind a column and the page immediately recognised him as Christiaan's lieutenant, Bucklin.

"Tell me. I'll make certain he gets it."

The page was about to protest that the message was for the knight alone, but a look from the soldier convinced him that it would be in his own best interests to comply.

"The king wishes to speak to Sir Christiaan in the throne room immediately."

"He'll be there. Now go!"

The page scurried away anxious to put as much distance between the muscular man-at-arms and himself in the quickest possible time. Bucklin approached the knight and stood quietly to one side. After a few moments Christiaan raised his head.

"My Lord, the King..."

"Wishes to see me in the throne room immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Bucklin never ceased to be amazed at the knight's perceptive abilities. He could not possibly have heard the hurriedly whispered exchange between himself and the page, yet he knew what had transpired. Of course he was aware that his paladin was more than an ordinary knight of the realm; indeed Christiaan was not only a Knight of the Sword but the designated Royal Protector.

The Knights of the Sword were a select enclave within the military, an elite body whose members were sworn to uphold the values of truth, honour and justice, and who pledged eternal allegiance to the Crown. Small in numbers, the knights nonetheless formed a nucleus of power within the army and it was from this core of talented and courageous warriors that the King's Guard was chosen. Even among the select few, Christiaan had proved his mettle and had earned just reward; before the age of thirty he had been elevated to the esteemed rank of Royal Protector.

Christiaan rose from his knees, his devotions completed.

"Come, Buck. We must not keep the King waiting."

The soldier dutifully followed his knight out of the chapel and across the inner quadrangle to the donjon, Christiaan's burnished armour clinking musically as he strode through the echoing corridors of the keep to reach the throne room. The two guards at the door stood to attention as the paladin approached and a court attendant ushered him into the presence of the monarchs with a deferential bow before retiring, closing the door behind him. Bucklin waited outside, his presence not required.

The Queen hurried forward and embraced her champion without the least regard for protocol.

"My dear, Christiaan!"

The knight smiled and kissed her hand.

"My Lady."

The king's welcome was no less enthusiastic, the three of them forming a relaxed group within the throne room, friends rather than royalty and subject.

A scant half hour later Christiaan left the throne room signalling for Buck to follow. The lieutenant had to run to catch up.

"What's the hurry?"

"We're leaving."

"What? Now?"

"Within the hour. I'm to lead a force against Ragnatha."

The soldier stopped abruptly in his tracks.

"Ragnatha! Are you completely mad? We don't even have an army!"

"You have no faith, Buck. If you stay with me and watch you might learn something - eventually."

"I hope I live that long," he muttered under his breath.

Christiaan turned to him and to his surprise began to laugh. He was still laughing as they entered the chapter house.

The next hour was chaos unleashed as an expeditionary force was hurriedly created from the soldiers within Almara Tor. Two hundred and fifty men from the garrison and six knights including Christiaan made up the final number who rode from the fortress several hours later, Almaric's only defence against the invaders who even now poured over the frontier by the tens of thousands.

Bucklin put aside the heavy breastplate and helped Chris shed the rest of his armour. The small force had ridden hard for most of the day, eager to cover as much territory as possible given the urgency of the situation. Bivouacked now beside the River Verdica, the army took a well-earned rest yet in spite of still being on home ground sentries had been posted. With the Ragnathan's moving at an incredible rate it was a wise general who covered every contingency and Chris was not one to leave anything to chance. The two men turned as the tent flaps parted and a bulky figure filled the entry.

"By the Great Mother, I could do with a drink!"

"That's not unusual, Reuter," Christiaan replied mildly, "if you can stand a little rough red from Stissa, there's a skin over there."

With a grunt the knight availed himself of the offered wine and sank unceremoniously into a camp chair, which promptly vanished beneath his bulk, stretching his long legs out in front of him. Suddenly the tent seemed to have grown smaller by half. Reuter belched contentedly after a generous swig from the wineskin, then turned his attention to Chris who was removing the last of his armour.

"It's a futile gesture you know?"

Christiaan belted his sword over his surcoat and settled it comfortably around his waist.

"Yes," he agreed, sadly.

"Then why?"

"Would you rather we sit back and do nothing? Wait at the Tor to be besieged and die a slow death of starvation or pestilence?"

"You know the answer to that! But nor do I wish to ride into the teeth of Lord Gris's barbarians with only a handful of troops."

"It's not to the east that we ride."

Reuter's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Then where?"

"We go north, my friend. Less than a cohort is no number to ride against the might of Ragnatha."

"Sense at last, brother? I thought us to be on a fool's errand."

Christiaan's customarily intense expression softened into a rare smile.

"You may still have the right of it, but Almaric will not fall without a fight."

Reuter drank again, now thoughtful.

"Do you really think we can stop the advance?"

"No, but I do believe that Lord Gris can be made to earn every inch of Almarican territory that he crosses."

"But Chris, they are ten thousand..."

"In the deserts of Mekka," interrupted the Royal Protector, "I fought against the Jypta outnumbered a hundred to one, yet we were victorious. The reason? Small, mobile forces who continually harried the Jypta armies; units of only ten men which could wreak havoc among the regular troops because of their ability to infiltrate, attack and withdraw at speed. We became known as the Ghost Army then."

The other knight looked horrified.

"That is the cowards way of fighting, my friend."

Christiaan slowly raised his head as, too late, Reuter realised what he had said.

"You would name me a coward to my face?"

The big man paled visibly.

"On the Great Mother's name, Chris, you know that was not my meaning. Forgive me if I have given offence."

The paladin's reputation as a swordsman had been justly earned and the Keltic knight had no intention of being challenged to combat over a careless remark. Instead Christiaan merely sighed.

"Fortunately for you, I know that your mouth often moves faster than your brain! A failing of the Kelts I believe."

Reuter nodded ponderously.

"True indeed, we are known for being outspoken and many's the fight it's gotten me into, I can tell you!"

"There will be enough fighting to suit even you, Reuter without you ever opening your mouth, so it might be wise to keep your own counsel for the duration. As for the order of battle, that is my decision and outnumbered as we are we have no choice but to modify our own method of combat. We will speak of this further tomorrow when I call the Knight's Council."

The Keltic warrior rose and put aside the wineskin, severely depleted after his brief indulgence, and quickly bowed his head in a curt salute.

"Tomorrow then, Chris. Stay in Peace."

"Go in Peace, my brother."

Reuter's place was soon taken by Decouvir, A Galalan knight of Christiaan's own age. Tall and raven haired, he had proved a stalwart friend since the two of them had been novices together, and Christiaan welcomed his fellowship. They greeted each other with a genuine warmth, and when Decouvir suggested a walk to stretch their muscles cramped from the long day's ride, the Breton knight readily agreed.

Numerous cooking fires dotted the campsite as hungry soldiers attempted to transform rations into something remotely edible. With no cooks or central mess at hand it was every man for himself, and even the knights were obliged to prepare their own supper. Decouvir, still in his armour, accompanied Christiaan at a leisurely pace through the encampment. The blond Breton was a handsbreadth shorter than his darker companion and beardless, giving him the appearance of being younger when in truth he bested the Galalan in age by five years. In turn Decouvir deliberately cultivated a mature outward appearance and kept his hair in Q'Ubbrian fashion - long and tied back in a queue. It would have been difficult to find two people more diverse than this pair of knights who now walked companionably about the camp, but in common they shared the vow to the Crown and the Great Mother which united them in a single cause. More, they shared a friendship forged in good times and tempered in bad, weathered by passing seasons into a bond which neither time nor distance had managed to erode.

"I noticed Reuter was bending your ear earlier."

"He's going to be a problem. I feel it already."

"He talks too much, that's all."

"No. He's too inflexible, too rigid, in his thinking."

Decouvrir smiled broadly and paused at the river bank, staring into its murky depths.

"A Kelt will fight to the death, but don't ever ask him to change the way of things."

"That's it exactly!"

Chris crouched at the water's edge and tossed a small pebble into the water.

"Remember Barracc'him?"

The Galalan recalled all too clearly the campaign against the Mekkans several years before.

"Of course. We were but a few then too, yet we persevered and eventually defeated them."

The Breton straightened and turned to look back at the encampment where his entire force now rested.

"We are even fewer now than then. Look. Two hundred and fifty men."

"Aye. We're between a rock and a hard place my friend, no argument, and for once I don't envy you your position as commander." Decouvrir reached out and grasped his fellow knight's arm in a rough gesture of affection. "But don't take it to heart; only the good die young so we should have an eternity ahead of us yet to beat the barbarian bastard!"

"I only wish I had your confidence."

The unmistakable sound of a bowstring being released galvanised Chris into instinctive action, prompting him to turn and launch himself at Decouvrir shouldering him aside and using the impetus to carry both of them to the ground. The sound of bowstrings thrumming filled the air and a murderous rain of barbed metal descended on the camp which erupted in turmoil in response to the surprise attack. Across the river a band of a dozen or more war-painted warriors of the hill tribes broke from cover with a blood-chilling cry and galloped away mounted on the shaggy upland ponies which they favoured. Several soldiers from the camp quickly mounted unsaddled horses and gave chase, fording the river in spite of its depth trusting in their horse's ability to carry them safely across.

Decouvrir, keen to be part of the action, struggled to free himself of Chris's weight but the Breton still lay heavily across him, unmoving. Alarmed by Christiaan's stillness the Galalan renewed his efforts to break

free and, succeeding, turned quickly to kneel over his friend. Of the potentially lethal volley of missiles aimed at the camp one at least had found its mark. A crudely manufactured arrow had entered high up in the knight's unprotected back and when Decouvrire gently eased him over to rest on his lap, he saw with some trepidation a handspan of the barbed missile jutting from Christiaan's neck.

Concerned knights and troopers alike gathered quickly around the wounded man, Bucklin pushing through the throng to reach his commander. In spite of his own anxiety Decouvrire relayed the order to abandon the pursuit of the attackers not wanting to lose any of the already small force to minor skirmishes and soon after the trumpeting of the ramshorn recalled the reluctant troops back to the camp. The painted savages galloped unhindered towards the hills from whence they came.

Decouvrire quickly dismissed all two of his brother knights, Reuter and Latrobe, and Bucklin who was tending to the fallen Breton.

"We must get him back to his tent. The fewer of the men who see this the better."

The lieutenant shrugged.

"Word will spread quickly whatever we do and the tale will grow in the telling."

"No doubt, but let us not fuel the rumours. Help me to carry him away from these curious eyes."

Bucklin slowly set aside the pewter basin of bloodied cloths and drew a woollen travelling cloak over the sleeping knight. The arrow, its barbed head razor sharp, had miraculously pierced no vital organ but had inflicted a vicious wound tearing open the paladin's left shoulder and it had taken all the soldier's skill to remove the arrow without causing further damage. Still, pain and loss of blood had taken their toll of the man who had passed in and out of consciousness since being brought back to the safety of his tent. Outside, the remaining five knights stood uneasily around the campfire both worried for Christiaan and puzzled by an attack ill-fated enough to see their commander - the Royal Protector - struck down when their task had barely begun.

Chris woke an hour before sunrise, confused until a sharp pain lancing through his back and shoulder brought him back to reality. He tentatively turned his head acutely aware of the stiffness in his neck and decided that he could probably manage to sit up, a feat he managed with only minimal discomfort. The upper part of his chest and left arm had been bandaged tightly and the herbal odours of chamomile and thyme, among others, lingered pleasantly about him. Chris smiled faintly and ran his hand over the neat bandaging recognising Buck's handiwork. He glanced around but his lieutenant and good friend was not in the tent. The Breton started to rise but feeling suddenly faint he realised how weak he was and quickly

resumed his former position, afraid that he was about to lose consciousness again. At that moment a figure entered the tent and seeing the knight sitting up, hurried across the floor.

"Chris!"

Buck.

"I didn't think you would be awake so soon."

"Don't fuss, Buck. Just help me to get up and dressed."

The soldier ignored the request and instead rested a large hand on the knight's good shoulder, feeling the heat of fever on him.

"You're not going anywhere."

"No! Listen to me. I must call the Knight's Council at first light. It's vital that I am seen to be untroubled by my injury, and even more that I am still capable of leading this expedition."

"You're mad, Chris. You can't do it."

"I can and I will, Buck, but you have to help me."

The lieutenant shook his head.

"I can work medicine, Chris, not miracles."

The big man pushed the paladin firmly back onto the pallet. Christiaan in his debilitated condition and able to offer little resistance to Buck's prodigious strength gave himself up to his friend's attentions without further protest. Some time later the Breton, drowsy from the herbal concoction Buck had prepared to ease his pain, once again broached the subject of the Knight's Council.

"Time is the enemy, Buck, as much as Lord Gris right now."

The soldier nodded gravely in response fully aware of the problems facing them, for without the Breton in command the entire expedition was in danger of foundering before it had even begun. Should that happen, the Ragnathan's had already won.

"All I need is an hour. Give me one hour to talk to my captains, to set the plan in motion and then I will rest for as long as you want."

Bucklin faced a difficult decision for he had dedicated most of his adult life to this man but he was a pragmatist and after some time considering the morals of the problem he sighed heavily and reluctantly agreed.

"An hour? I'll do what I can, but you must do exactly as I say."

Vin slowly buckled on his sword belt, adjusting it until it sat comfortably with the longsword hanging within easy reach at his side. After his enforced sojourn at the inn his weapons no longer felt such an integral part of him and looking at his reflection in the polished bronze mirror he began to feel somewhat foolish. Few of the citizens of Missa went about their daily business armed and he was starting to feel out of place in his studded leather armour, carrying a sword, axe and dagger in full view, yet Inez had insisted and he was reluctant to gainsay his only ally in Almaric. He drew his sword several times experimentally going through the training exercises so familiar to him and was relieved to discover that neither his strength nor dexterity seemed to have been affected by his injury and subsequent convalescence. Unfamiliar with prolonged inactivity he had been thankful when Inez in consultation with the apothecary, Nathan, had finally pronounced him fit and immediately proposed an outing, although she had been annoyingly secretive about the whole venture. Whatever the young Q'Ubbrian's motive, Vin was only too happy to go along with any suggestion she might have that would get him out of doors, if only for a few hours.

He found Inez in the courtyard barely recognisable as a tavern serving-wench, dressed as she was in a loose and flowing light blue tunic over voluminous pants of the same fabric with her long black hair braided and coiled around her head like an ebony crown. She stood between an attractive buckskin cob and a deep-chested bay charger, the pair of horses making her appear even more ephemeral. Smiling, she beckoned him and he quickly crossed the cobbled yard to lift her into the saddle. Taking up the reins she waited for him to mount the bay. Vin hauled himself unceremoniously onto the animal's broad back, for while he had learned the fundamentals of horsemanship he was no equestrian. His military experience was as a footsoldier not cavalry, which was almost exclusively the domain of the nobility, and although he could maintain a passable seat he was not entirely comfortable on horseback.

"I thought it best if we rode. We have some distance to travel."

Vin nodded hoping the beast would be forgiving enough to excuse his inexperience.

"Let's go then. After all you're the one who knows where we're going."

Vin soon forgot his trepidation at the prospect of an extended ride as they left the town for the open tracts south-east of Missa. It was a glorious day and the mercenary revelled in his new-found freedom, happy to be in the company of a beautiful woman as they travelled through the lush green countryside. Not once did she give any indication as to their final destination and he did not trouble to ask. He barely noticed the passage of time but the sun was high in the sky by the time Inez pointed out the ring of standing stones in the distance.

"Is that where we're going? A stone circle in the middle of nowhere?"

Inez smiled indulgently and leaned across to touch Vin on the arm.

"It will all soon become clear to you, trust me."

"I do trust you," he assured her, and found that he meant it.

The stones rose like mighty granite sentinels out of the plain, each upright measuring three times the height of a man and as wide as his outstretched arms, describing a perfect circle fifty paces across. Within the outer circle lay a crescent of smaller stones as high as Vin's shoulder and at the centre of these stood a granite altar stone. The soldier shivered involuntarily for although the sun shone above them, the megalith stood in sombre shadow and he felt a chill to the marrow of his bones. Sensing his reluctance Inez led him through the outer stones and into the heart of the druid tabernacle towards the slab of stone that reminded him somewhat morbidly of a sepulchre. The wind keening through the standing stones sounded eerily like voices wailing and set his ears vibrating with a constant humming.

"Why have you brought me here?" he whispered fiercely, "it's as cold as the grave and about as inviting!"

She turned then to face him resting her hands lightly on his shoulders and he was struck once again by her extraordinary loveliness.

"Do not ask me for reasons. I cannot explain, any more than I can explain the movement of the sun or the moon but know this: today you have started on a path that will lead you to your destiny. It is a path that neither you nor I can change for it was determined at the hour of your birth. I know this because I have seen it written and the runes do not lie."

"Runes?" Vin laughed then but it sounded hollow even to his own ears. "What's this all about Inez?" The soldier's puzzlement at the Q'Ubbrian girl's behaviour was rapidly giving way to vague apprehension but before he could draw another breath to give voice to his concern she silenced him with a gesture.

"No questions. Soon enough you will understand."

As she raised a hand and drew back shadowy forms materialised from behind the standing stones, each figure robed and hooded in the manner of the druid priests, one for each opening in the circle. The ring was complete and at its centre Vin with no possibility of escape.

Heart pounding he put his hand to his sword hilt, preparing to draw the blade, and with the keening wind filling his ears he backed towards the altar.

Chris brought the council to a satisfying close having initiated his campaign plans with the confidence of his captains - and his authority - undiminished. The knights, with the exception of Decouvrir, had retired to muster their troops. Only Buck and the raven-haired knight remained each aware of the enormous effort it had taken for the Breton to get through the meeting. Several times Decouvrir had been on the verge of inventing some excuse to terminate the assembly but in the end it had not been necessary. Now Chris leaned heavily against the makeshift trestle that held his maps and the scattered scraps of parchment bearing his calculations for the campaign, the pallor of his face only emphasising the dark smudges beneath his eye sockets. Slowly raising his head he grinned lopsidedly at his two friends although they could both see the sweat of fever glistening on his skin and the pain mirrored in his eyes.

"That's the first hurdle. Now for the second which may be slightly more difficult."

The two men exchanged bewildered glances.

"What's that?"

"Getting back to my tent."

Indeed the Breton's vitality had all but deserted him and the three of them had barely entered the paladin's pavilion before his knees buckled and only Decouvrir's swift reaction keep him on his feet. The two men carefully stripped Chris of his armour and mail, Buck fretting at the blood-soaked bindings.

"He needs to rest," repeated the soldier for the fifth time in almost as many minutes.

"Rest - and a small miracle," countered the Galalan in a whisper.

"You have no faith, my friends." Christiaan's voice startled them both for they had believed him to be insensible but he slowly opened his eyes and fastened his gaze on his brother-in-arms, "This is only a minor deviation in my plans."

"Chris, you and I have been friends since our youth and comrades almost as long so you won't take offence if I speak plainly. If you insist on ignoring the fact of your own mortality I doubt that you will need to worry about campaign strategy, or anything else for that matter! I have no wish to return to Almara Tor with the news of your demise."

"Not exactly my intention either."

"Be serious," continued Decouvrir testily, "you must go with Buck to Missa. I will ride with our combined troops northward and pledge to meet you in the town within the sennight. What do you say Buck?"

The lieutenant nodded gravely.

"I think that's the best we can do. We can be in Missa in two days, three at most, find a physician and rejoin the force as soon as we are able."

Chris raised himself painfully on his good elbow.

"Do I have any say in this?"

"No!"

"Not this time my friend, because you know that I'm right. Any other course of action would endanger not only your own life but that of the King and Queen and ultimately all Almarica."

The Breton sighed in resignation, for once outmanoeuvred, and closed his eyes.

"There you have me Decouvrir," he conceded grudgingly, "While I might be prepared to forfeit my own life I cannot sacrifice the Crown."

Within the hour camp had been struck and the main body of troops split into separate units each commanded by a single knight. Their task - to raise an army. As several hundred cavalry scattered to the four winds, two horsemen rode north alone.

Geppes Cross. A few buildings scattered around a crossroads but a welcome enough sight for weary travellers in need of a night's rest. The inn proved to be a better prospect than first appearances

suggested and the landlord showed the two men to a reasonably clean and airy room on the first floor which overlooked the courtyard and stables.

"You're far enough away from the common dormitory here not to be disturbed. If I might say so, your companion looks in need of a rest. Is he not well?"

Buck cast a worried glance at Chris, obviously trying hard to mask his exhaustion and injury. As far as the innkeeper knew, they were a pair of traders from Trenganu on Almaric's southern frontier journeying to Missa, and Buck was determined to maintain the pretence.

"Nothing that a good night's sleep won't cure. My companion here is much too fond of the karak and he is still paying for his over-indulgence last night!"

The innkeeper grinned broadly, fully conversant with the after effects of the potent liquor when taken in large amounts.

"I'll leave you gentlemen in peace then, shall I? Supper's at eight."

The landlord withdrew clearly amused and Buck could hear his fading chuckle as he descended the wooden stairs to the tavern below. Chris immediately eased himself onto one of the cots and stretched out.

"Great Mother! I could sleep for a week."

Within minutes the blond knight was indeed asleep and, loathe to disturb him, the soldier quietly left the room. Descending the wooden stairs he strode purposefully through the inn and located the door to the inner courtyard. Stables had a comforting effect on Buck with their distinctive odours and familiar warmth. There was a simplicity here that appealed to the big man, a suggestion of plain, honest toil and a reminder of his childhood.

Chris's horse whickered softly in recognition, tossing his mane as Buck crossed the hard packed earthen floor towards his stall.

"Hello, old fellow."

He noted with approval that the horse had already been rubbed down and that the manger was filled with fresh hay. There was nothing further for him to do here.

"He's a fine one. Erish stock if I'm not mistaken."

Buck started at the voice. He had assumed himself to be alone in the stable and he turned irritably to face the unexpected company, annoyed that he had been caught unawares. His initial irritation rapidly faded to astonishment as a tall, blonde woman stepped into the light. She wore a kilt of leather, its fringes studded with metal, and a bodice of light armour plate but her arms and legs were bare. By her right side hung a sword and across her chest were strapped a brace of throwing knives. She laughed lightly and stepped forward a pace.

"Sorry if I startled you. Allow me to introduce myself. Maire Og Fiann of the Fen."

The woman was only slightly shorter than Buck with a well-defined physique and when she extended a hand in friendship he felt the strength of her grip.

"Bucklin Wilmington. Most people call me Buck."

"Buck it is then. You can call me Maire."

She looked appraisingly at the mustached soldier and absently stroked the muzzle of Christiaan's horse.

"What brings you here to this forsaken neck of the woods? This is the haunt of traders and smugglers. It's not often we see the nobility around these parts."

"Nobility?"

She laughed again.

"You might be able to fool these simple folk but I recognised your knight."

Buck became defensive, suddenly wary of this warrior of the Fens.

"What do you want, woman?"

Maire eyed him thoughtfully for a few moments then shrugged.

"I want nothing of you, but Chris is a friend of mine and I would know what brings him to this smuggler's haunt like a thief in the night."

"You know Chris?"

"Indeed! Some years ago we campaigned together against the Uzbai invaders."

"Then why did you not come to him openly, rather than accost me in a stable?"

"I thought that under the circumstances you would not wish any attention drawn to yourselves. Chris would not enter a place cloaked and hooded but for good reason. Your pose as travellers may fool these country folk but not Maire Og Fiann!" She moved to stand before Buck with her arms folded in front of her. "What ails, my lord?"

"Look, I don't know you. I only have your word that you know Chris."

Maire shook her head in disgust. "You are a fool. You don't even recognise help when it stands before you. If you have doubts then let me talk to him."

Buck hesitated in the face of her obvious sincerity, torn between suspicion and hope. If she was indeed an ally then with her aid it might be possible for the three of them to travel in relative safety to Missa. An extra pair of eyes and hands would certainly not go amiss.

"Chris is wounded. Beyond my ability to heal."

The Fen woman clutched his arm in a vice-like grip.

"My lord is hurt? Then take me to him. I must see him!"

The paladin lay as Buck had left him stretched out on the low bed still wrapped in his travelling cloak. He looked deathly pale in the lamp light, only the slight rise and fall of his chest indicating that he still lived at all. After some moments the sound of their voices roused the sleeping knight and he opened his eyes, but although Maire and Buck stood over him he showed no indication of recognising either.

The Fen woman knelt at the bedside and touched a hand to the Breton's brow then lifted the cloak to examine the wound, her own features a study in concentration. Her sure fingers plucked at the bindings and she indicated that Buck should bring the lamp closer.

"This wound has festered. I fear my lord is gravely ill." She looked up at the lieutenant her own concern mirrored in his face. She rose and grasped the soldier's arm. "I will get some help. There is a woman I know who can be trusted and who will know what to do." Maire turned quickly and made for the door, glancing back once at the bewildered Buck. "Trust me."

Buck looked down at Chris tossing restlessly on the bed and muttering uneasily in his fever and back to the door through which Maire had disappeared. Trust! What option did he have? With a sigh he slowly poured water from the jug into the ewer and began to wash the knight's sweating body.

Maire returned in a surprisingly short time accompanied by a cloaked and hooded figure almost half her size. The Fen woman closed and made fast the door while the stranger, foregoing introduction, crossed immediately to Buck's side and threw back the hood which had covered her face.

"Light. I need more light here."

While Maire fetched candles from the wall sconces, Buck turned the lantern wick as high as he could holding the light source over the bed as the stranger's nimble fingers started to work.

Chris, divested of his travelling attire, lay bare-chested; the wound at the junction of neck and shoulder startlingly red against the paleness of his skin. For a fingerlength around the lacerated flesh the inflammation glowed hotly and the merest touch of the healer's skilled hands elicited a convulsive response as the knight shrank from the contact. The woman then raised the Breton's shoulder, pushing gently and in response he turned onto his side exposing the corresponding wound high in his back. Muttering indistinctly she delved into the leather bag she had brought with her and retrieved several packets, each wrapped in coloured thread, before looking first at Buck then at Maire.

"I must open the wounds again. For this I will need your help for there will be much pain. The poison has to be drained else your knight will weaken and die. He is already very weak and I fear for him, but I will do all I can. First, I will give him a draught of herbs to dull the pain, then you must both do as I say."

Maire sat back on her heels, wiping the sweat from her own brow with the back of her hand. The healer had indeed spoken the truth and the night had been filled with both blood and pain. Now Chris lay as pale as death beneath the coverlet, his wounds having been scoured clean and denuded of damaged tissue. Maire glanced again at the line of stitches where the woman had sewn the edges of the wound together, amazed at what she had witnessed in the preceding hours. The healer spooned some infusion she had prepared into Chris's mouth and turned to Maire.

"Here. Make sure that he drinks all of this. I must leave now. Twice a day I want you to put some of this unguent I have prepared on the wound and have him drink this brew I have made four times a day. If he survives the next day, he will live. I have done all I can."

"Thank you."

She nodded abruptly and gathered her things together, pausing to look down at the knight as he slept. She made an intricate gesture with her fingers.

“May the Thrice Blessed look over him; now and for always.”

In a moment she was gone and Buck was left standing, mouth agape as he realised what she had said.

“Thrice Blessed? A pagan?”

Maire got up from the floor and stretched expansively.

“Who cares which deities she worships? She carries healing in her hands and for that we should give thanks. For all I care she could have summoned all the demons of the underworld to aid her as long as my lord lives.”

The burly soldier was about to protest but Maire silenced him with a look before handing him the cup and spoon.

“Tend your master, Buck. I’m going to sleep.”

The weak winter sun filtered through the window shutters falling across the bed where Chris lay in narrow strips of yellow. The Breton turned his head and opened his eyes, puzzled for a moment as to his whereabouts. Buck sat dozing against the wall at the foot of the bed and a strong odour of herbs permeated the room. He moved to get up but a cool, strong hand restrained him, even before the pain in his shoulder stopped his movement.

“No, my lord. Do not vex yourself.”

He concentrated on the voice, vaguely familiar but a name he could connect to it remained tantalisingly out of reach. He breathed deeply, clearing his head of the tendrils of fog that lingered to confuse him and again his eyes swept the room. A tavern. Where? His stomach rumbled noisily and he decided that he was hungry. At the same time he realised that if he did not gain access to a privy soon he would be in danger of overtaxing his very full bladder and embarrassing himself. With that purpose in mind he mustered his sadly depleted reserves of strength and in one movement swung his legs out of the bed, hastily grabbing the sheet to cover himself as his gaze fell on the warrior woman standing, hands on hips, in front of him.

"Maire!"

"None other. What do you think you're doing?"

"I need to get up," he explained.

"That is not wise, my Lord."

He sighed heavily, remembering how stubborn this woman could be.

"Let me make one thing very clear, Maire. It would not be wise for me to remain here when I have urgent need of the outhouse. Buck!"

The lieutenant sprang to his feet, instantly awake and struggling to free himself from the blanket which had become tangled around his knife sheath.

"Gods and thunder, Chris! Where's the fire?"

Maire giggled at the sight, a curiously girlish sound coming from the imposing female warrior.

"My lord has a need to answer the call of nature."

Buck still looked baffled, trying to put the blanket aside and not look too foolish in front of the Fen woman.

"What?"

Chris stood up and wrapping the sheet around him leaned on the tall man for support, his voice a harsh whisper in Buck's ear.

"For the love of the gods, Buck, I need to piss!"

The Breton knight had to concede that he felt tolerably well; weakened, but in little pain, and feeling an incredible sense of well-being. He was fascinated by Buck's account of the pagan woman's involvement for in spite of being a representative of the church he was open-minded enough to understand that there were powers at work in the world for which neither he nor his faith had an explanation. Chris raised his

arm experimentally and was surprised that he felt only minor discomfort but nonetheless he was relieved that it was his shield arm rather than his sword arm that was affected.

"Tomorrow, Buck, I think we will be ready to ride on to Missa."

The lieutenant nodded, working a whetstone across the blade of his knife.

"Another two days should see us there," he agreed, concentrating on keeping the strokes smooth and even.

Maire looked up from her cross-legged position on the floor, oblivious to the expanse of thigh she was presenting to Buck's view. She was a warrior first and a woman second, that her physical attributes would induce any response in a fellow soldier was anathema to her and as such not worthy of consideration. Had she suspected that Chris' lieutenant harboured any thoughts of bedding her, she would have been quite capable of taking a knife to his throat.

"I shall travel with you." Not a request.

The knight nodded. His first recruit.

"Are you looking to sign up?"

She laughed.

"I go where I please, my Lord. If our paths cross and we travel as one for a while then so be it but you know that I fight for no-one but myself. I will pledge to you but not to your army."

Chris grinned. He had known that would be her answer before he asked.

"I'll take your pledge, Maire. You will ride with me."

She stood and her knife sang as she drew it from the sheath. Chris stood in turn and held out his hand for Buck's newly sharpened knife. The lieutenant hesitated wondering what strange game this woman was now playing with the Breton.

"Buck?"

He slapped the butt into Chris' palm and shook his head. Mad Fen people with their strange ways and rituals.

Maire held out her left arm, holding her knife in the right; Chris mirrored her actions. Slowly she drew her blade across the knight's wrist, a line of blood immediately springing up in its path.

"Anrydeddu, Teyrngarwch, Gwaedoliaeth," she intoned as she raised the wrist to her mouth and licked the red droplets beading on his skin.

Chris completed his part of the ritual. His blade in turn opening a shallow wound across Maire's left wrist.

"Bywydol, Dihenydd, Ailenedigaeth." He repeated his part of the pact.

Slowly, almost sensuously he raised the woman's hand to his mouth and drew his tongue along the line made by his knife. Then quickly they pressed their two wrists together commingling their blood and said as one: "Unedig."

For a moment neither of them moved their eyes locked, then sealing the ritual with a kiss they broke apart.

Buck stepped forward muttering about heathens, ready to bind his wrist but Chris shook his head.

"Leave it, Buck. It's part of the ritual that it remains untended."

"Do you think you can spare any more blood, Chris?"

Maire wiped the blade on a wad of lint from her pouch and resheathed the knife.

"You fuss like a fishwife," accused the warrior, "My Lord will not suffer from a scratch."

Buck threw a glare at the woman which she feigned not to notice, instead turning her attention to the Breton.

"I will meet you tomorrow, here, one hour after sunrise. Ffarwel."

Chris nodded.

"Ffarwel."

The woman strode out of the room, her leather kilt fringes swaying revealing well-formed thighs. Buck turned to the knight.

"I suppose there's no getting rid of her now."

Chris held up his bloodied wrist.

"Not until I release her from this pledge. If I choose this binds her to me until death."

Buck's mustache drooped.

"This is going to be a very long campaign, Chris, I can feel it in my bones."

oooOOOooo

Vin knew he was dead. He knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt. His body had been lain on the altar and he had passed over into the spirit world. Cold tendrils of mist caressed him and barely seen shadows swirled at the periphery of his vision, gone before he could focus on them but he knew on a primitive level that these phantoms were malignant; spectres of fallen warriors. Was this then the Halls of the Dead? He rose, sword in hand and moved away from the altar stone, his body as light and insubstantial as the mist that surrounded him. Turning back he saw his corporeal form still lying on the granite slab and for a moment he mourned his own death but driven by a need he could not explain he walked forward, drawn towards a shimmering portal at the limits of the chamber's dimensions. The wind whispered in his ears, and in the distance he could hear the sound of rushing water but he was completely and utterly alone.

The mechanism of his death did not concern him unduly. He didn't recall any pain. Had there a been battle? No matter, he was here and he had a job to do. He glided soundlessly through the vast chamber hardly noticing the niches in the wall filled with mouldering bones and followed instead the path inlaid in the floor. Yes, the path. The intensity of the wind increased blowing his long hair behind him like a banner and he struggled to move forward. It was so cold he shivered and immediately wondered at the incongruity of it. A spirit by definition should be removed from all things physical. Faltering, he shook his head and looked once more at the beckoning portal, struck by the sheer malevolence that poured through its open door. Enter. It was a command. He approached, his eye fixed on the darkness beyond - was this then was the gateway to the Havens? He had never imagined evil to dwell in this place but it hovered like a miasma between him and his destination becoming more intense with every step he took.

Go back.

He halted, suddenly unsure. One voice commanded him to enter another to go back. If he went back what would be his fate? To wander in limbo for eternity between the living and the dead? He raised his sword and stepped over the shimmering line that marked the limits of the Halls.

The air crackled and spat blue tongues of lightning around him and he was driven to his knees by the agony that pierced his vitals. The sound of his own voice filled his ears as he threw back his head and screamed, transfixed within the frame of the portal unable to go forward or go back as wave after wave of pain radiated through his body. Dimly, he felt a tug at his mind: *Come back*. He was being consumed; a flame burning within him eating away at his very soul, draining his resolve. With a last effort of will he took his sword in both hands and rammed it between the stones, leaning on the crosspiece and levering himself to his feet until once again he was standing. As the darkness descended over him he roared a single word that echoed off the walls and shook the portal to its foundations: the unspoken name of the Great Mother - "JAHENNAH!"

"Vin."

He had thought himself dead. Now he wanted to be.

"Can you do something for him, Josiah?"

He heard a rumbling baritone respond.

"Not until he awakens, my Lady. It is too risky. He has walked a dangerous road this day from which few ever return."

Vin struggled to open his eyes. Gods and thunder but he felt as if he had been ridden over by a thousand cavalry -- twice. Bright sunlight assailed his eyes and he groaned; by the Great Mother he had never known such pain.

"See, he wakes now. You must help him."

He managed to focus for a moment on the grizzle-haired tree-priest leaning over him before his vision blurred again and the sheer effort of keeping his eyes open became too much for him. What did these people want with him when all he wanted to do was die? Suddenly he felt his shoulders being lifted and someone was supporting him while a strong and bitter brew was forced past his lips. He gagged and coughed, triggering a muscular spasm that sent his body rigid but a second and a third draught flooded his tortured body with a soothing warmth and he relaxed as the elixir started to ease his pain.

"Ye Gods," he uttered finally, "am I alive?"

He drank more of the brew feeling new life coursing through his veins with each swallow until finally the cup was withdrawn.

"Enough soldier. You need to rest now."

Vin shook off the lethargy that threatened to overwhelm him and forced himself to sit up, shrugging off the supporting arm which had thus far held him upright. For a moment the heaven's spun and he held his head in his hands, his stomach threatening to spill its contents. He had felt like this once before after the sack of Devros when his battalion had been given permission to loot and he and six others had found themselves an abandoned wine shop, only this time he didn't have the excuse of drinking several bottles of karak.

"I can rest when I'm dead," he snapped sulkily, "What did you do to me?"

He looked around at the standing stones and remembered entering the stone circle. In a rush, realising he still lay on the altar slab he launched himself to his feet, head spinning and wound up on his hands and knees on the grass retching weakly. Inez knelt beside him and massaged his back.

"It will be alright, Vin. Do not take on so."

He collapsed on his side in the cool, sweet-smelling grass and allowed the woman to stroke his hair, soothed by her gentle touch and finally falling into a deep sleep.

The druid leaned on his staff and shook his head slowly.

"I fear the venture has sorely taxed your soldier, Inez."

She looked up sadly.

"He failed did he not, Josiah?"

"Not failed exactly, but he did not have the stamina to go further -- at least not this time. It was a near thing, Inez. He was almost lost to us but his strength of will prevailed."

"You will send him again?"

"Not yet. First he needs to understand what it is we ask of him."

She ran her fingers through the damp, dark hair at the nape of his neck.

"We cannot stay here but I do not think he can ride."

Josiah shook his head.

"You return to Missa, my lady. I will take care of our soldier. It is not far by the waypaths to my cottage. I will tend him and instruct him. If all goes well, we will meet you at the inn just one week from today."

"Agreed. I will make an offering to the goddess for success."

She sighed and rose, her glance lingering on the sleeping soldier before she finally moved to the horses and taking the charger in tow, mounted the buckskin cob. She did not look back as she rode away.

oooOOOooo

Ezra thought it was probably time for him to move on. He was not a fighter and he had seen enough to convince him that to stay in Missa would be tantamount to suicide. The town would fall just like others across the continent had fallen before it and he had barely escaped from one or two of those with his hide intact; and while it might not mean much to anyone else he was rather fond of his hide. He looked casually around the inn and called for another ale. These people were not fighters either; they relied on people like him to keep them safe. Well, maybe not quite like him. After all his penchant was for guile and deceit, in assuming other identities in order to further his own ends and in presenting to the world a face that was not his own. His talents had served him well as a spy, they had also served to line his pockets along the way given his extraordinary success with the dice. With the silver he had managed to accumulate he could be aboard the next ship off continent and leave this sad and sorry kingdom behind. The thought of ten thousand barbarians descending on Almaria made his decision just that much easier. He made his way to a table where a lively dice game was in progress and setting down his tankard, slid into a vacant seat. Perhaps just a few more days to consolidate his wealth and he would certainly look for a berth aboard one of the outbound vessels.

Josiah stood at the doorway of his modest cottage and watched as Jeh-di swung the soldier's battle-axe in a figure of eight, posturing and cavorting as his imagination got the better of him and he slipped into the role of fabled warrior. The druid shook his head. That boy would never make a mage whatever his

mother had thought; his head was in another place entirely and usually his flights of fancy had something to do with becoming a fighter. To be a church knight was his dream.

Josiah had tried. Jeh-di's mother on her death bed had charged him with the care of her son and had begged that he take him into tutelage as a mage. She had her own dreams and to see her son as a scholar and worker of magic had been one of them. He had made a promise but as the boy got older he was having hard time keeping it. Jeh-di had tried, the druid would grant him that, he had done all he was asked but his mind was never on the task. He still had trouble telling a nettle from a dandelion and Josiah had not dared charge him with brewing the medicinal teas after the last disastrous attempt. He was sure the lad did not do it on purpose, he just did not have the makings of a mage.

The druid watched as the energetic youth completed a complicated manoeuvre with the axe and nodded in approval as the heavy weapon flew from his hand and landed solidly in the trunk of a distant oak. Whether his mother liked it or not his talents seemed to lie in other directions and he for one believed it was time to allow the young man the freedom to choose. He would turn twenty-one in a few short weeks and then it would be up to him if he chose the path his mother had wanted for him or walked his own way. Josiah believed he already knew the answer.

The problem was that Jeh-di was too old to start now as a squire to one of the church knights, that was something begun when a boy attained his thirteenth year not his twenty-first. He could become a foot soldier, and the Goddess knew that the kingdom would be in dire need of soldiers in the times to come, or he could apprentice to a masterless knight for his training and gain rank that way but he would never be able to serve the church. Josiah mulled the problem over and decided that possibly the answer was in his own back yard so to speak, or more to the point, in his study. The mercenary, Vin, would maybe have some advice for the lad. If nothing else he could show him the right way to wield a sword and, more importantly, how to avoid being skewered himself.

Leaving the lad to his games, he drew back into the house and walked through the main room dodging hanging bunches of drying herbs and various living ferns that festooned the rafters with their feathery tendrils. Pausing at the entry to his study he glanced at the figure on the pallet, still sleeping soundly. The soldier had not wakened on the journey through the waypaths, which was just as well as the experience could be rather daunting for the uninitiated, and Josiah had made sure that he stayed asleep once they had arrived back at the cottage, a particularly strong herbal inhalation had ensured that. Vin needed to rest and recuperate from his out-of-world ordeal and sleep would achieve that end better than any other remedy. It would also give Josiah an opportunity to start teaching the soldier the things he was going to need to know before he could attempt the Halls of the Dead again and the sleeping mind was far more receptive to suggestion. Another day and he would rouse him and then his education would begin in earnest.

oooOOOooo

Maire took her pledge seriously. That was Buck's first thought as she rode knee to knee with Chris on the road to Missa. He sometimes wondered at knight's colourful past and realised how little of it he really knew and now, seeing him with this unusual woman and having watched the fascinating but rather disgusting ritual between the two, he wondered again. Had they been lovers? She would certainly be an entertaining bed mate he was sure yet there was a look in her eye that made him think it might at the same time prove to be a dangerous proposition.

Chris' physical condition had improved dramatically in the last day and a healthy flush of colour was returning to his skin. Of course, Buck suspected that Maire might have more than a little to do with that. He moved on ahead of the two riders, unable to watch the warrior woman any more as she fawned over the Breton practically climbing into his lap as they rode. He would rather she was trying to climb into his lap if the truth be known.

That they followed in Decouvri's wake was obvious. The land had been stripped of men, livestock and produce. Some hamlets were deserted and Buck guessed that soon they would be overtaking entire families on the move, seeking the refuge of a large town and in doing so taxing the likes of Missa to its very limits to provide for the influx. This was going to be a very interesting campaign he decided; a handful of knights leading an untrained army against the might of Lord Gris. Ah, well quality not quantity was what counted. He was forced to laugh at his own optimism but at the same time conceded that stranger things had happened -- at least he thought they had.

"Buck!"

He turned and rode back towards the knight at the summons.

"Much as I hate to do this, we need to make camp. I don't think I can go much further today."

Buck nodded.

"Not much daylight left anyway, Chris. We can get an early start tomorrow and that should see us in Missa by midday."

Maire leaned across her horse's withers and gave Buck a glance that might have been approval.

"I will not make camp with you. I will ride on ahead, if the way is clear you will see me in Missa tomorrow."

Chris dismounted and walked over to her, extending his hand and the two of them gripped wrists in a firm clasp.

"Ffarwel. May the Great Mother watch over you."

"And you."

He slapped the big horse's rump and the animal surged forward. The Fen woman flashed a wide smile, waved and was gone.

Chris wearily pulled his bedroll from his horse and threw it to the ground.

"She's a good soldier, Buck."

The man-at-arms looked slightly surprised that Chris had been able to read him so easily.

"I have no doubt." He loosened the girth on his own mount and unhooked his saddle bags.

"Yes you do, Buck, that's why I said it. Her ways may be strange to you but I'm telling you, Maire could best you in a fight without raising a sweat."

Buck started to laugh then stopped, believing the Breton and thinking of the brace of knives the Fen woman carried.

"She any good with those pig stickers."

"She could pin your ears back, make no mistake."

The man-at-arms did laugh then and, still chuckling, began to make a fire. He would hunt for a rabbit or two once they were settled.

oooOOOooo

Vin felt as if he were trapped in a dream. Images flowed ceaselessly through his mind, weaving a story as clear as if he was listening to a bard paint a word picture but the visions left him uneasy, seeking an escape from their insistent message. Only there was no escape, as there was no waking, just endless dreaming.

Josiah silently watched over the mercenary and contemplated again the morality of what he was doing to the unknowing soldier. On waking Vin would be unable to tell which of his recollections were real and which had been implanted; he would carry with him the knowledge of past lives -- his own as well as others -- and he would understand the nature of his task at last. With a sigh he made a subtle gesture over the sleeping soldier, snuffed out the candle and removed the aromatic herbs from the steam kettle; at least tonight Vin would sleep a sound and dreamless sleep for tomorrow his education would begin in earnest.

The tree-priest turned slowly and locked eyes with Jeh-di. The young man, self-appointed guardian to the soldier since Josiah had brought him back to the cottage hovered uncertainly in the doorway.

"Did you get the comfrey, son?"

Jeh-di shook his head, his expression partly guilt, partly defiance.

"No. Ain't gonna be collectin' flowers no more, Josiah."

The older man cocked an eyebrow not daring to show his amusement at the youth's recalcitrance. Jeh-di had come to his own decision and Josiah knew there was little he could do about it but it would not do to make it too easy for the would-be warrior.

"Collecting flowers? Do I detect a hint of unruliness in my pupil?"

"Damn it, Josiah. That's girl's work..." he glanced anxiously at the large druid, "...um, sorry, but it's not what I want to do with my life. I want to go with him. Be a soldier."

Josiah moved forward and placed a gentle hand on Jeh-di's shoulder.

"Have you ever thought he might not want you along, son? Vin is a mercenary; he swears allegiance to no one and sells himself to the highest bidder. All he knows is killing and fighting and I hardly think a novice is a companion he would choose to accompany him on his journey, wherever that may be."

"But I can fight. I've been practicing."

The druid smiled.

"So I've seen, and you certainly have a talent for swinging a battle-axe; far more than the skill you have for brewing herbal teas but that still doesn't mean that this man will tolerate your company. You are young and untried."

Jeh-di became defensive.

"He's not that much older than me."

Josiah shook his head.

"It may seem that way but I can guarantee that he has lived and died a thousand times in his short life. You have already seen his scars and won honourably or dishonourably they are still scars -- on the mind and soul as well as they body." Taking pity on the crestfallen young man he slapped him heartily on the back. "But I will talk to Vin tomorrow. As I must instruct him, mayhap he will agree to instruct you and if he does, you may go with my blessing, son."

Jeh-di nodded and looked keenly the sleeping soldier, then back at the druid.

"You'll see. I'll be a great warrior. A sword-master not a scullery-boy!

Jeh-di strode out of the room, his shoulders squared, his walk almost a swagger and the tree-priest sighed as he watched him go. Anything was possible he supposed.

Vin yawned widely and ran a hand through his hair, now tangled and snarled after his long sleep. His studded leather armour felt constrictive and his own body odour disgusted him, for while tolerant of privation and hardship in the field under most other circumstances he preferred not to smell like a wild animal. Rising awkwardly from the pallet he found his muscles were still stiff and stretching the kinks out of his back decided it was time to get back into training. His wound had healed well enough now.

The river ran close by the cottage and finding a secluded glade the soldier shed his armour and clothing before plunging in a shallow dive into the icy water. Breaking the surface he blew water from his nostrils and began an easy sidearm swim across the river, feeling the knots ease out of his muscles as he moved through the water as agile as an otter. Only when the chill of the water threatened to seep into his very bones did he make for the shore and throw himself lazily onto a sun-warmed rock to dry. Finally, refreshed and warm again he sat up and finger-combed his hair, swearing as he untangled the knots before he grabbed his loincloth and secured it around his hips. He forced himself to go through all the moves of his craft, the physical exercises that kept him fit and supple -- and alive -- but feeling the protests of unworked muscle and sinew with every separate action. Sweating lightly, he finally paused in his exertions, aware that he was being watched. A boy. No, a youth, sitting calmly on a rock following his every move. With a sigh, he gathered up his leggings and pulled them on, quickly lacing them up the

front before shrugging into the loose sleeveless shirt he wore under his breastplate. He slowly picked up the various pieces of armour he had left to air and straightened sending a keen, blue-eyed glance to the young man.

"You have a name?"

"Jeh-di. I am...I mean I was...Josiah's apprentice."

"Josiah?"

"The druid. The man who brought you here."

Vin nodded slowly. Josiah. Yes, he knew Josiah. In fact he was sure now that he knew Jeh-di but his mind was still not clear, as if his memories were hidden behind a veil; he could see them but through a gauze filter.

"How long have I been here?"

"Just two days."

"I've been asleep for two days?"

"Josiah said you walked in the Halls of the Dead. You needed to recover."

Vin paled and dropped his equipment as a blinding flash of pain ripped through him, an echo of what he had experienced on the Other side but enough to send him to his knees. When his head cleared, he found Jeh-di beside him and allowed the younger man to help him up, nor did he protest when the lad picked up his gear and steered him back towards the cottage.

"I think you should speak with Josiah."

Vin raised a hand to his head, closing his eyes trying to repel some of the images that suddenly crowded in on him.

"Yes. Perhaps I should."

Chris had been to Missa before and it had changed little in the years he had been absent, only the number of people thronging the streets seemed to have increased and not all of them he knew were seeking refuge. No, Missa had become a thriving town -- a city almost.

He kned his horse forward, picking his way through the crowds wondering if it might not be quicker to go on foot but Buck had insisted that they ride. He turned to his lieutenant.

"We need lodgings, Buck. Do you know of anywhere? It's more than a few years since I was in this place."

Buck nodded.

"I know of a tavern. Good food, good ale and good wenches."

"I'm more interested in the beds," smiled Chris, not yet fully recovered and already weary of the road, "then maybe the ale."

"Chris, you must be getting old. What is the use of a good bed without a good wench to share it with?"

The Breton knight ducked his head.

"The way I feel now I doubt that I could rise to the occasion, Buck."

The man-at-arms grinned wickedly, a definite sparkle in his eye as he addressed the Knight of the Sword.

"Now I remember a little filly, Chris, that would soon have you standing to attention..."

"Buck, just find us a room," he interrupted before the man went completely overboard, "and forget the temptations of the flesh for the time being. We have work to do in case you've forgotten."

The lieutenant sighed heavily.

"No, I hadn't forgotten, but she was such a package of surprises that I thought..."

"Buck!"

"Yes, my Lord. A room."

Inez smiled as she served the evening crowd. The Ranger Ezra had been responsible for markedly increasing the trade at the tavern for which she had been thankful for not only did he attract players to the gaming table but he often entertained the crowd with his singing. In the week he had been staying at Joyner's the place had turned a handsome profit. Threading skilfully through the tables she delivered two jars of ale to a pair of newcomers, a mustached soldier whose hands she had already noticed had a tendency to wander and a handsome church knight, whom she had already decided was unwell. Maybe she would be able to help him if he stayed more than a day. A Knight of the Sword was not a common sight in Missa and she wondered briefly why such a man would be staying at Joyner's. Someone in the crowd called for a song and she smiled as the green-eyed Ranger took up the challenge moving closer to the fire with his glass of karak in his hand. That he was a Ranger had surprised her; a lettered man obviously, a glib tongue certainly but the man was an incorrigible rogue and he had a cunning hand with the cards and the dice that left most of her customers much lighter in pocket when they left than when they arrived. Yet, she had an affection for the Ranger that she told herself had nothing to do with his charming manners, expensive clothes and emerald green eyes. She paused in her own work as the crowd fell silent in anticipation.

*The cocks are crowing daylight is appearing
It's drawing nigh to the break of day
Arise my darling out of your slumber
Arise my darling and come away.*

*And when he came to his true love's window
He kneel'ed low down upon a stone
And through the window he whispered softly
Arise my darling and let me in.*

He sang a capella, using no instrument but his voice and she turned in quiet surprise as the mustached soldier she had just served joined in the third verse, singing harmony in a deeper complementary voice.

*Oh who is that, that is at my window
And who is that, that gives me no rest
Tis I, tis I your poor wounded lover
Who feign would speak with you love a while.*

*Oh go away then and ask your mamma
If she would have you my bride to be
And if she says no then return and tell me
For this is the last time I will trouble thee.*

As Ezra and the soldier began the next verse, the knight contributed his own harmony and the three voices wove together in a rich vocal tapestry to complete the song.

*Oh my mamma she is an old aged woman
And scarce can hear, love, a word I'd say
But she bids you go, love, and court some other
For I am not a fitting love your bride to be.*

*Oh I will go unto the wild mountains
Where I'll see nothing but the wild deer
And I'll eat nothing but the wild herbs and
I'll drink nothing but my true love's tears.*

The tavern erupted at the unexpected treat and coins showered both the Ranger and two soldiers at the table by the fire who had so ably contributed to the song. Ezra nodded his thanks to the two men and quickly swallowed a mouthful karak before wandering over, his money pouch bulging.

"My heartfelt thanks, sirs. Perhaps you should consider forsaking the military and between us we could make a small fortune as wandering troubadors." He turned to the man-at-arms. "A most excellent baritone if I may say so." He held out his hand, his smile revealing a flash of gold. "Ezra Standish at your service. Ranger and, as you have already witnessed, occasional entertainer."

"Bucklin Wilmington," offered the mustached one, shaking hands firmly, "and my companion is Sir Christiaan L'Arabee, Knight of the Sword and Royal Protector to the Crown of Almaric."

Ezra choked on the remainder of his drink.

"Holy Mother!"

The Breton sighed and extended his hand suddenly very tired.

"Just call me Chris."

Buck watched quietly as Chris shed his outer gear and lay down on the bed too tired to even take off his boots. The lieutenant was concerned that the wound in his neck was inflamed again, and that he was looking unwell. Rummaging through his saddle bags he sought out the last of the packets the weirding

woman had given to him and setting up the little camp stove he boiled some water. Maybe once Chris had been given a chance to rest in a real bed again his health would improve. At the back of his mind he wondered what Maire would do if she found he had allowed the Breton to sicken again and decided he would rather not put it to the test. A soft knock at the door prompted him to draw his knife and slide the bolt back with care.

"Who is it?"

"It is Inez. I have something for you."

Inez. Bronzed skin, dark eyes, smooth shoulders, black hair, kissable lips. He opened the door.

"Come in."

The woman's gaze fell immediately on the knight and she moved quickly to the bedside, her fingers lightly touching the pale exposed skin of his shoulder.

"Your knight has been wounded. I know of a healer who may be able to help. I have some talent in healing but I sense this is not of this world."

Buck stepped forward frowning.

"Not of this world. What are you talking about?"

"There is magic at work here. Something evil." She knelt beside the bed and placed her hands over the wound, closing her eyes.

Chris moaned, pulling away and the woman paled suddenly, taking her hands away and standing up again, visibly shaken. Buck took her arm convinced she was about to swoon.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

She shook her head.

"No. No. He needs a healer. I shall fetch Nathan."

Bucklin watched as she fled the room, obviously upset, then returned his gaze to Chris. The blond knight slept on, losing ten years in repose as his stern face relaxed, reminding Buck of years past and their adventures together before he had been elevated to the knighthood. Rabble rousers both they had

sowed enough wild oats between them to cover a ten acre field. He stroked his mustache thoughtfully; well, some things never changed at least! With a smile he tugged off the Breton's boots and finished undressing him before pulling the eiderdown comforter over him and returning to his herbal preparation. The song in the tavern had brought back some long forgotten memories and he could not recall when he and Chris had last been carefree enough to raise their voices together in harmony.

The Ranger. Ezra. He would know more about this enigmatic stranger. The man could be useful in their coming quest; not a soldier but with his skills a valuable addition to any company and they would need every man they could get. If he was not already aligned to a particular overlord he could swear allegiance to Chris. He smiled wondering how the Ranger would react to an oath of allegiance like the one Maire Og Fiann had sworn. Chuckling at the mental image, he strained the tea into a clay cup and set it aside to cool.

Chris roused long enough to drink the tea and fell immediately back into an exhausted sleep, a light sheen of sweat glistening on his face and neck but whether that was an effect of the tea Buck could not say. He turned up the lamp and set about cleaning and sharpening the Breton's weapons, a routine which helped the lieutenant to think as he diligently worked the blade with the stone and carefully cleaned off any rust spots. He worked dubbin into the tooled leather grip and coated the blade with a layer of oil before sliding it home into its plain leather scabbard. He had already started on the knight's armour when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come."

He held his own well-balanced throwing knife in his hand as a precaution and waited for the door to open. As promised, Inez had brought a healer, a Moor by the name of Nathan who nodded briefly at Buck before crossing to the sleeping man. He touched the heavy cord stitches starkly black against the knight's skin and felt the heat of his brow.

"Tell me what happened."

Buck explained the circumstances of the injury and the Breton's subsequent treatment and apparent recovery at the hands of the pagan.

"Then tonight, he seemed to sicken again. I put it down to his tiredness from the journey and sleeping outdoors but Inez thinks it may be something more."

As they spoke, Nathan had laid out an assortment of fine instruments on a white cloth, some made of bone, some of the finest Mekkan steel. Inez had opened a number of salves and unguents filling the room with a pungent combination of aromas.

"There is something of great evil connected with this injury. I cannot say what but I believe I can cleanse the taint. The pagan woman did well but I doubt she had the necessary ingredients or skill to completely eradicate the poison with which this wound is contaminated."

"And you have?"

"I promise you I can heal your knight. Do you trust me?"

Buck looked anxiously from the blond man, his friend and liege lord, to the dark skinned healer. Without his permission the healer could not practice his art.

"Yes. Do what you have to."

Nathan clipped the black stitches and took out the threads, opening the wound once more. In a procedure that seemed to Buck to take hours, Inez and Nathan applied all the knowledge of their craft to cleansing and treating the ragged tear first in his neck then in his back. Chris remained oblivious throughout and Buck suspected that the knight had been drugged with some potion to keep him free from pain and distress. Finally, the healer inserted a number of tiny stitches along the neck wound in different colours of thread then daubed a line of salve along the scar. The two of them rose to stand beside the knight, laying hands on his brow and chest and linking fingers to form an unbroken circle. Buck could not hear the intonation but the very air in the room crackled with invisible power for a moment, like standing in an open field during a summer storm, then the man packed up his gear and handed the man-at-arms a small jar.

"Use some of this every day on the wounds. I will return in seven days and take out the stitching." He extended a hand in friendship and smiled showing very white teeth. "Stay well, my friend."

Buck nodded.

"My thanks."

He looked to the sleeping Breton and shook his head in wonder. He would swear that Chris looked better already.

Ezra sat quietly in the corner and watched the activity in the inn. He had been surprised to see a church knight so far north, he had been rendered speechless to learn that the man was the Royal Protector. Renowned company indeed for a trading community such as Missa, but his own knowledge of the coming threat from the East gave credence to the man's claim. He had heard of Sir Christiaan; indeed

so had most of the continent. If tales were to be believed he was a master swordsman and a valiant fighter, however it was rumoured that he often overstepped the boundaries of Church doctrine and was very much his own man. The Church tolerated both his individualism and his transgressions merely because he was more valuable to have with them than against them.

The Ranger topped up his glass and wondered if he should perhaps stay in Missa a while longer and see what developed. A few more successful nights at the gaming table and he would have made enough money to buy his own tavern and retire, preferably in a quiet haven over the water. It was a pleasant enough spot, although he knew that would change soon enough if Lord Gris came within hailing distance, but it was easy enough to board a ship if the situation became untenable. Not that he was averse to fighting, he just preferred not to seek death and glory in the general melee of battle. He had spent two profitable years making forays into the Eastern territories, living on his wits alone and gleaning valuable information for Almaric, but he used cunning, subterfuge and deceit as his weapons and while he was both an excellent swordsman and archer he resorted only to violence when all else failed. With a sigh he gulped down the fiery spirit and stood up. All in all an interesting night. Now to see what the morrow would bring.

The Ranger paused as the crowd fell silent, and followed their collective gaze to the figure standing in the doorway. The sight of a Fen warrior, one of the legendary women soldiers, dressed in leather and carrying a massive claymore strapped to her back had effectively struck the noisy crowd mute. The woman ignored the stares, her icy gaze sweeping the room before she took a step forward.

"I seek Chris L'Arabee. Do any of you here know of him?"

The response was a sudden return to drinking and chatter, none of the patrons prepared to make an admission even if they had known who she was talking about. One did not willingly enter into dialogue with a Fen warrior. She pushed impatiently through the crowd and Ezra moved forward to intercept her.

"I see you, Warrior." He began the traditional greeting of the Fen raising a closed right fist to his left breast.

She quickly appraised the man before her and nodded her head, mirroring his gesture.

"I see you also, Friend. You have seen my sworn Master? He travels with a companion."

Ezra inclined his head. So, this warrior was pledged to L'Arabee.

"They are rooming at this very inn, Warrior."

She nodded.

"My eternal gratitude."

He made a gesture in the secret battle language of the Fens and the woman smiled.

"I know you now for a true friend. We will talk but first I must find my Lord. You will wait for me here and we will drink a wineskin together."

Ezra extended his hand, accepting the invitation and as the woman strode away towards the barkeep he claimed a table by the wall and once again sat down. An interesting night indeed.

oooOOOooo

Josiah patiently worked the pestle against the granite bowl of the mortar and crushed the dried herbs, releasing a heady aroma of wood sage and fennel as he watched out of the open window of the cottage. The mercenary looking more like his former self walked beside the energetic young apprentice, the two of them deep in conversation. Every now and then the soldier would pause and demonstrate some point he was making and once or twice he saw the older man smile. He had not yet spoken to the mercenary about Jeh-di but it seemed the lad was working his own schemes and to all intents and purposes seemed to have gained Vin's attention and indeed enlisted his aid.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats drew the druid's attention away from his work and brushing flakes of herbs from his hands he moved outside. Vin and Jeh-di, he noticed were also alert and watching as horse and rider approached at speed. The animal cleared the low hedge around the cottage and slid to a halt a few feet from the tree-priest.

"Inez!"

She leaned over the horse's neck.

"Josiah, I think I have made a mistake." She looked anxiously at Vin who was walking towards her.

"There is another. I have misread the prophecy."

Josiah stepped forward and lifted the woman from the horse.

"Misread? This cannot be otherwise Vin would never have survived the test."

"No. Don't you see. There is another now in Missa and I have seen the signs on him. There are two who must see this quest through as one. Vin failed because he holds only half of the power. The other half of the power is held by another."

The druid nodded slowly.

"That would explain many things. And this man. Who might he be?"

She looked awe-struck as she raised huge brown eyes to the older man.

"He is a Knight of the Sword, Josiah. Sir Christiaan L'Arabee. A Church man, Josiah! How can we convince him to aid our cause?"

"Where is he now?"

"He is at the inn. Sorely wounded but Nathan has attended him. We must act quickly or all is lost."

Josiah looked at the two men standing off to one side.

"We must all travel to Missa. I will take us by the waypaths." He turned to Jeh-di. "Make ready for a journey, son. We leave within the hour. Vin, I would speak with you. There is much you need to know."

The mercenary paced in agitation the length of the small cottage, his face a study in angry confusion.

"You sent me into the Other World to fight without even consulting me? You put my head in the noose and stood back to see what would happen! Because of you I have walked in the Halls of the Dead and have been touched by the very breath of Shaitan."

"This is so," confirmed Josiah, "You were chosen."

"Chosen! Ye gods, you mean I was press-ganged and sent on my way with no choice of my own."

"The prophecy..." began Inez but the soldier was not listening.

"A pox on your prophecy, Lady! I want nothing to do with this. You weave magic and deceit, and speak of things that mean nothing to me. I am a soldier. I go where there is war and I kill for whoever will pay

me the most money. My trade is dispensing death." He looked from the dark haired woman to the grizzled priest and spoke slowly. "Don't you understand? I - have - no - conscience!"

As he spoke the last words he plucked the dagger from his side and sent it flying through the air to thud into the door frame, where it remained quivering, its blade sunk almost a thumbspan into the wood.

Josiah stood up and moved quickly to the distraught soldier's side.

"I understand your anger, son. But you seem not to understand your importance in the greater scheme of things."

"All I understand is that you want me to go back -- willingly -- to the Other World. To walk again in the Halls." He ducked his head, "And I don't think I have the courage."

The druid smiled and placed a hand on Vin's shoulder.

"Believe me, it is not courage that you lack. You acquitted yourself well enough against powers you knew nothing of and you were unprepared."

Inez rose and drifted towards the two men, taking a position to Vin's left.

"My Warrior. I beg of you, do this thing. Else all is lost and the evil that comes from the East will consume the world leaving nothing but dust and ashes in its wake. This I have seen. This I know."

"Lord Gris?"

"That is the name he uses in this life but behind him come all the minions of the Netherworld and the hosts of Shaitan. This battle is not one that will be fought on the plains of Almaric, my friend, but one which will take you to Valhalla and beyond. Are you ready for this challenge that has been put before you?"

Vin sighed.

"There is no other way?"

"The fates of all the worlds, known and yet unknown, lie in your hands, Soldier."

"A heavy burden indeed, priest."

"Then you will do this?"

"I will think on it. I would first know mine enemy."

"Then come. We go to Missa and yet hope to enlist the aid of another. Meanwhile we will speak of this thing in detail."

Vin strode to the doorway and pulled the knife free.

"Certainly. Then we may discuss terms."

"Terms?"

"I am a mercenary. Everything comes at a price, druid."

oooOOOooo

The Breton sighed contentedly and leaned back in the tub submerging himself in the steaming water and relishing the heat on his aching muscles. Buck had already disappeared with one of the wenches availing himself of the additional entertainment on offer but Chris wanted nothing more complicated than a bath and was quite happy to have the room to himself.

The energy-draining lethargy that had held him in its grip since he had been wounded was gone; instead he felt pleasantly tired and his mind was cleared of the disturbing images that had plagued both his waking and sleeping hours. He owed the healer a great debt of gratitude. Closing his eyes he could not help but smile, so great was his feeling of well-being.

"My Lord has thoughts not worthy of a church knight?"

He opened his eyes his smile widening.

"Maire. I am just enjoying the water and the fact that I am alive."

The Fen warrior crouched beside the tub and picking up a *lufah* began to wash the knight. Surrendering Chris knew there was no point in resisting, as a pledged warrior she would take on his care as her bounden duty and nothing he could say would sway her to do otherwise. For his part he could demand anything of her; she would willingly lie with him if he so chose as part of her obligation to serve. Only one thing was forbidden and that was that she would not bear him a child. Should he ever demand such a thing she would be forced to fall on her sword. As a warrior, breeding would only be permitted once she

had attained the age of thirty-eight summers when she would retire from her profession and return to the community. An intriguing people, mused the knight behind closed eyes enjoying every moment of Maire's ministrations, there were no men in their culture. The warriors selected mates from outside the fens roaming far and wide across the continent in their search for a worthy male to sire a child and the women produced only female offspring. Strange people but great fighters and true friends.

Having fallen into almost a doze he opened his eyes again as he felt a disturbance in the water, his eyes resting appreciatively on the well-muscled and very naked form standing in the tub before him. Smiling Maire slowly lowered herself into the water and wedged herself into the tub beside him.

"I think my Lord needs something more than a bath," she growled and nibbling his ear, set about demonstrating exactly what she thought that something was.

It took a great deal to render Bucklin Wilmington speechless but the man-at-arms had not had a great deal of experience with the Fen people and he discovered that Maire Og Fiann could immobilise his tongue faster than a scold's bridle. He stood in the doorway of the bathhouse he had only recently vacated with a delightfully nubile wench in tow and after one glance decided it would be prudent to retire discreetly and finish dressing in one of the ante rooms.

Great Mother! What in hells was Chris thinking? He chuckled suddenly as he laced his jerkin, his uncharacteristic outrage rapidly dissipating, as he guessed exactly what Chris was thinking. After all actions did always speak louder than words. Having completed his dressing he cast a last glance at the doorway leading to the bath room and smiled at the sounds coming from behind the curtain. The Breton, he decided, was fully recovered.

Buckling his sword around his hips and securing his dagger in its sheath he felt complete enough to face the world once again. Bathed and bedded he now needed a good meal and a tankard or two of rough red to round off the evening. His contemplation of further indulgences was rudely interrupted as a man exiting one of the rooms collided with the man-at-arms, both men quickly backing off prepared to defend or attack as dictated by circumstance. Buck's hand slid from his dirk as he recognised the Ranger from the tavern, and he was slightly surprised to see that Ezra's knife was already in his hand - a wickedly slim blade that snicked home, retracting with a whisper as he thumbed a button on the haft. He considered himself fortunate indeed that they were not enemies.

"Well met, Ranger. It seems our paths are destined to ever cross."

The man returned the knife to a leather device on his forearm then paused to straighten his ruby red doublet and adjusted his cuffs before settling his sword more comfortably at his side.

"Indeed, sir. However you seem to be missing your illustrious companion -- the most worthy Breton."

"Aye," Buck jerked his thumb in the direction of the room he had just left, "seeking a different kind of entertainment this evening."

Ezra tilted his head and raised a questioning eyebrow, a smile touching his lips.

"A church knight engaging in wanton fornication with a bath house wench? You shock me, sir!" He sounded anything but shocked.

"This is no common slut, Ranger but a Fen warrior."

The Ranger looked beyond Buck's shoulder and nodded slowly in understanding.

"The pledged one?"

"The very same. A lusty woman by any standard of measure. You know of her?"

Ezra started to walk away.

"I admit to a passing acquaintance with Maire Og Fiann and a long association with her people and armed with such knowledge I would not expect to see Sir Christiaan any time soon. Now, as you seem to be temporarily disaffected by your knight's good fortune would you care to join me at the tavern for a wineskin and a game or two of chance?"

Buck looked back once again to the curtained cubicle and shrugged, having no cause to doubt the Ranger's judgement.

"My pleasure. I was just thinking a few tankards of wine would go down right well about now."

"Then come, and let us enjoy whatever the night may bring."

oooOOOooo

Nathan carefully skimmed the frothing scum from the top of the bubbling mixture and spread it across a square of muslin cloth to dry and be harvested later. The simmering liquid in the retort gave off an acrid

odour that stung the nostrils and lingered on clothing, while at various points around the room other vessels of differing size and shape cooled, boiled or aged a diverse range of medicinals and tinctures. The apothecary's single room quarters served as not only his distilling room but his house of healing and his home, and at times had also served as a hospice. An itinerant Moor he had travelled widely across the continent gathering lore to further his craft and never truly finding a home until he had stumbled upon the port of Missa, where in the cosmopolitan atmosphere he could be accepted for his skills rather than his origins. Still a rarity in the northern kingdoms his dark skin for many held him as a man apart but his reputation for healing had soon won over the sceptics and he had build a thriving practice near the docks where he was kept busy tending the results of bar room brawls and inter-ship enmity as well as serving the populace as both apothecary and healer.

Finally he straightened, glanced at the timepiece in the corner and was surprised to find that it was beyond seventh candle mark. With a sigh he snuffed out the flame beneath the pottery vessel in front of him and moved to a put away his materials before seeking some supper. A heel of bread and a wedge of cheese with some ale to wash it down would have to be enough tonight as he had not thought to pass by the market earlier in the day. With a sigh he looked at the dried crust left in the crock -- well maybe not -- this was fare fit for the alley dogs and while he had eaten worse in his time he decided that he was not yet an ascetic and deprivation was not his creed. The tavern then and a hearty bowl of stew from the pot which always simmered above the fire. The thought of it set his stomach rumbling and he quickly finished clearing his workbench before grabbing his hat, blowing out the candle and shutting the door to his modest room over the chandler's shop.

Vin did not fully comprehend how the four of them came to be standing on the outskirts of Missa when minutes before they had been at Josiah's cottage. The druid had spoken of waypaths and folds in time but all the mercenary knew was that they had stepped through an archway of trailing perfumed vines into a sweet-smelling bower and walked out into a deeply shadowed street redolent with the effluvia of open drains and other even less savoury aromas. He recalled a faint pressure against his eardrums and a momentary sensation of dizziness followed by a vague feeling of nausea but there had been no sense of motion yet here they were back in Missa. He glanced at the other members of the party and could not resist a smile.

"Do you do this often?"

Josiah shook his head, his expression serious.

"Only when necessary and where speed is of the essence. It is most taxing on the spirit not to mention a drain on the energy."

Vin realised then how tired the older man looked and it came to him that the druid himself was responsible for transporting them; the waypaths were merely a means to an end. No doubt the uninitiated could walk into the same bower through the same archway and would find nothing but a perfumed garden and his appreciation of the priest's skills increased somewhat in that moment of understanding. Nevertheless, he had still not forgiven the druid for his interference, and the presence of other memories in his mind still unnerved him but he was warming to the gruff and grizzled man and he did owe him something for his part in saving his life.

"Where to now?"

Josiah looked to Inez.

"My lady? This man of whom you spoke may be found where?"

"At the inn. He has a room at the tavern with his man-at-arms."

"Then to the inn it is and an excuse to partake of some of your fine ale."

The priest moved off down the narrow street and Vin followed, wondering just what it was that he had been drawn into. A simple soldier at heart he wanted nothing more complicated in his life than a sword in his hand and a foe with whom to fight, a willing wench when the need was upon him and a full stomach at least twice a day. Now he was embroiled in a conflict he barely understood involving planes of existence from which the stuff of legends was made. It still chilled the marrow of his bones to think that he had passed into the kingdom of the dead and returned. It almost stilled his heart to think that he had agreed to go back. Shivering involuntarily he quickened his pace and caught up with the druid. Tonight he would join the priest in a drink and for a short time at least, forget the coming trial.

Joyner's was a hive of activity and Vin paused in the doorway, stunned by the size of the crowd filling the room. There was barely room to move between the patrons but Inez lead them to a quiet place in the corner near the kitchens where a small table stood vacant. Scanning the room she finally leaned close to Josiah and gestured towards the fireplace.

"See the soldier with the mustache sitting with the man in a red doublet? This is the paladin's man-at-arms. You will know the knight when he comes. He wears black and on his sleeves worked in silver is the device of a serpent entwined with a sword."

Josiah nodded and Inez excused herself to tend the busy bar.

Vin kept his eyes on the two men at the table by the fire. The dandy in the high boots, black hose and blood red doublet laughed and the mercenary saw a flash of gold from an upper tooth on the right side. He wore an impressive blade but he found himself wondering if the man could use it or if it was merely a decoration. The man-at-arms was a different story. He looked as if he knew the business-end of a broadsword well enough and the weapon he wore was plain but serviceable -- a soldier's blade. He would be interested to see the man they had travelled the waypaths to find in such haste. A Knight of the Sword no less. He had fought both with and against Church knights; in fact one of his closer calls with death had been at the hands of a Knight of the Crown, one of the King's Brigade, who had used his broadsword like a throwing knife and had skewered the Galalan through the side. He had been almost sorry to kill him but in that battle no quarter had been asked and no quarter had been given by either side. Fortunately, Almaric had a liberal view of mercenaries and their role, so his life was not forfeit in this kingdom as it was in many others. The fact that he had fought against the King of Almaric would under any other circumstances be considered treason and as such a hanging offence but he was protected by virtue of his trade and the red shoulder flash. Of course in Q'Ubbria there was a price on his head but that was to be expected considering the last excursion he had taken into that territory had been with the express purpose of killing the Sultan.

The Galalan felt a dig in the ribs from Josiah's elbow and his gaze immediately flicked to the doorway. This had to be the one. As Inez had described he wore black leather, studded and shot with silver, the device of the Order of the Sword worked cunningly into the sleeves so that with each movement the snake rippled sinuously. He was not alone. Beside him strode a fabled Fen warrior and Vin felt a distinct aura of power emanate from the pair as they crossed the room. Pledged then. She would be a formidable opponent alone but as a bonded warrior she would be a force to be reckoned with, her own strength linked by blood with that of her lord. He made a mental note not to tangle with that one unless he truly wished to be sent to Valhalla.

The knight raised his head and Vin felt the force of his will as across the tavern the two men made eye contact. For a long moment the flinty blue-grey eyes held his own then with the merest inclination of his head -- recognition of a fellow soldier -- the man glanced away and sat down at the same table as his man-at-arms and the fellow in red. The woman moved to the fireside instead and leaned on the mantelpiece, casting a wary eye around the room, and Vin knew she would stay there as long as the knight remained in the room, watching his back. He wondered briefly what it must be like to have a loyal companion who would be there whatever the circumstances; a right arm on whom you could depend, someone to watch your back. As a soldier-of-fortune he was, out of necessity, a loner. In the ranks of the mercenaries you watched your own back because no one else was going to do it for you. Trust no-one was his own creed, the man fighting beside you today may be the man slitting your throat tomorrow. No, mercenaries did not have friends, down that path lay only grief and sorrow. He turned his head away and focused instead on the jug of ale Josiah had ordered and poured himself a generous measure.

Josiah wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and set down the half empty cup, looking speculatively at the young soldier.

"I believe we should introduce ourselves, Vin. It is most important that we speak with this knight as soon as we can."

Vin swallowed a good portion of his own ale and set down the tankard.

"I don't like your chances, especially considering the offer you intend to make him."

"Nonetheless it must be done but these are not favourable surroundings in which to discuss business. I propose we sit a while and see if an opportunity presents itself. Sometimes the Goddess works in unusual ways."

Vin shook his head and grinned.

"This I've got to see. Your Goddess up against Mother Church."

Josiah looked pained.

"Have you no faith of your own, son?"

Vin patted the sword at his side.

"I put my faith in this, Josiah. It's worked for me so far."

The Moor was surprised at the level of activity in the tavern so early in the evening but he had noticed over the last week that Missa's population was steadily growing as refugees from the eastern marches sought a safe haven. At this rate the town would be stripped clean of all provisions within a month and then there would be real problems, in his experience people were generally tolerant only until food started to become scarce then it was every man for himself and demons take the hindmost. From the rich aroma of cooking meat he had no worries about obtaining an adequate meal this night but he made a note to stock up on provisions before the situation became too dire.

He pushed through the throng, his path the bar a tortuous and difficult one as he threaded his way between tables and densely packed patrons, thinking he might retire to the courtyard once he had organised something to eat, after all the evening was warm and there was no sign of rain.

"Nathan! Over here. Come, join us."

The apothecary searched the room in an attempt to pinpoint the voice and grinned broadly as he recognised the druid, Josiah and his apprentice, Jeh-di. His military companion seemed familiar and after a moment's thought he finally placed him as the injured soldier he had been called to attend several weeks before at this very inn. The one Inez had marked as special.

"Josiah. Jeh-di. Well met, my friends. And how is my former patient?"

Vin had seen the apothecary just once when Inez had taken him to the dockside for the healer to check his wound shortly after he had been stabbed, but he knew that between them he owed his life to this man and the druid.

"I'm well, thanks to you. Will you share a jug with us?"

The Moor gestured to the crowd pressing in on the furthest reaches of the tavern.

"If you do not take offence I would rather take my meal outside in the courtyard where there is some room to move and some air to breathe. Maybe I could join you later if the offer is still open?"

Vin nodded in understanding.

"You are welcome at my table anytime, I have a blood debt to pay."

The healer rested a hand on the soldier's crimson epaulette.

"That you are sitting here tonight is payment enough. Consider the debt cancelled."

"My thanks."

The apothecary moved back to the bar and a few minutes later passed the table again on his way out into the courtyard at the rear of the inn, a platter of bread and meat in his hand.

The druid drained the last of the ale from the jug and called for a refill. Unable to resist a smile Vin leaned back against the wall behind him and with a sigh, crossed his ankles, prepared for a long night.

The mercenary was not entirely sure how he knew, but the distinct sense that something was wrong pricked at his senses until he could ignore it no longer. He had already risen, hand on his sword, when the first sounds of fighting drifted in from the courtyard. Across the room the knight in black was also on his feet and once again their eyes locked in mutual understanding. An unspoken agreement saw both men move in unison without haste but with a real purpose, watched with reservation by the other patrons of the inn.

As the two soldiers, mercenary and paladin, fell into step the knight cast a sideways glance at the younger soldier.

"You are new to this town?"

"A few weeks. You?"

"A few days."

They exchanged a smile and moved with an easy stride through the inn's back door and into the courtyard.

The apothecary, Nathan, was in trouble of that there was no doubt. A band of cutpurses obviously waiting for easy game as drunken revellers passed through the courtyard to the privy had waylaid the Moor and were intent on bodily harm having found his purse empty. The ringing whisper of blades being drawn from scabbards gave the footpads cause for hesitation and several of them ran before the two men had even made a threatening move. A warning from the knight however did not deter the others, so determined were they on their course of action and as a throwing knife whistled by Vin's ear, close enough for him to feel the breath of its passage, the two men engaged the foe.

The Galalan and Breton fought shoulder to shoulder, making short work of the remaining thieves, their blades weaving in a martial dance that was as elegant as it was brutal. Before the combined onslaught of naked steel the gang either fled or fell, until finally the courtyard was empty save for the dead and dying, the battered apothecary and the two swordsmen. Slowly the Moor got to his feet and dusted off his robe, a little worse for wear but generally unharmed. Wiping his blade on the doublet of someone who would no longer care, Vin resheathed his weapon and turned to find the knight duplicating the action.

"A good fight." He held out his hand. "Vin. Mercenary out of Galala."

The paladin took his wrist in a firm grip.

"Sir Chris L'Arabee. Knight of the Sword and Breton by birth."

"I think a drink might be in order." The Galalan looked over his shoulder. "Care to join me now, Nathan?"

The healer grinned and followed the two men back into the tavern, the crowd which had gathered to watch the melee parting before the soldiers in respectful awe.

The brief encounter with the gang of footpads if nothing else had served to lessen the size of the crowd in the tavern. A goodly number of the inn's patrons had made a hasty departure, mindful of the lateness of the hour and the lurking danger of thieves, leaving the tavern a great deal quieter than before. Joyner may have had cause to regret the loss of custom but no one else minded a thinning of the ranks. Least not the group who had claimed the central table in front of the blazing fire. The remaining patrons had gravitated to the edges of the tap room giving the table a wide berth, cautiously respectful of the combined arts of the seven men and one woman sitting there. The fact that the assembly included a church knight, a Fen warrior, a man-at-arms, a mercenary, and a Ranger gave rise to some serious speculation as the band's purpose in Missa. The positively martial assembly fairly bristled with assorted weaponry, a rare enough sight in the port, and brought home to the peaceable citizens the reality of the approaching threat from the East.

As the night deepened and the wineskin passed freely around the table, the party traded talk and shared information, forming the first fragile bonds of friendship and solidarity as unconsciously and as naturally as breathing.

Vin. The solitary mercenary finding perhaps the first suggestion of what it might be like to have true companions. Jeh-di. Apprenticed to a priest yet dreaming of a soldier's life, awestruck by the paladin and wanting nothing more than to emulate the knight in black. Josiah. The druid, content that he had finally reached the end of one quest only to start on a still greater one that would have consequences for the entire known world. Ezra. The Ranger, a true wolf in sheep's clothing, beholden to no lord and master but keenly aware of the advisability of seeking safety in numbers in such troubled times. Nathan. Apothecary and healer, linked to the druid by the magical arts and a shared faith, whose skill had already been put to the test by both the paladin and the mercenary. Buck. Man-at-arms. Friend, companion and trusted lieutenant to the paladin, living, loving and fighting with equal enthusiasm. Maire. Woman of the Fens and pledged warrior, swearing not only her life but her very heart and soul to the church knight to whom she was bound till death. And Chris. The Breton, Knight of the Sword and Royal Protector, sworn to deliver Almaric from the barbarian hordes by whatever means at his disposal.

Seven men and one woman.

Fate had brought them together. Destiny would make them heroes.