

# ***Kings and Vagabonds***

## ***II***

### ***The Journey***



***Jean Graham***

***2001***

The Breton stood alone, sword drawn, before him a hundred times a hundred warriors massed, intent only on his destruction. He flexed his fingers, tightening his grip and feeling the comforting familiarity of the weapon -- its weight, its balance -- an extension of his arm. He adjusted his stance and felt the reassuring presence of someone at his back. He did not turn to look, his gaze never wavering from the pressing horde, but he knew it was The Mercenary. So, not alone. The mass pressed inexorably forward, silent, implacable, deadly, and he knew that it was not his destiny to leave this place but he also knew he would never surrender.

The image dissolved into nothing as the sound of someone noisily moving around the room roused him from sleep. He lay unmoving for a long moment, the feeling of having discovered a significant truth still upon him. The dream smacked of prophecy and he wondered if indeed his destiny was to be linked to the Galalan soldier he had met only yesterday.

Throwing back the eiderdown comforter he stretched and launched himself from the low cot, thinking that if everything went according to plan he would not have the opportunity to sleep in a bed for many more nights to come. If Decouvrir had succeeded in his task then they would soon campaign against the barbarians and when sleep was even possible it would be snatched at a convenient moment, at best on the hard ground rolled in a blanket or on horseback as they rode. He smiled, not in the least daunted by the prospect but rather eager to join battle once again.

A decidedly under-the-weather Buck moved listlessly from one task to another, his brows knit together in either concentration or discomfort, Chris was unable to decide which.

“I never thought I’d see the day when someone drank you under the table, Buck.”

The man-at-arms grunted as he arranged Chris’ shaving equipment on the table.

“Cursed Ranger! I’ve never seen anyone empty a flask of karak with such ease and still stay sober. Beat me at the dice too. The man has unnatural luck.”

The knight shook his head, not in the least sympathetic to his lieutenant’s plight.

“Unnatural may be right, Buck. I suspect that our talented friend is also an incorrigible rogue. In future I suggest you keep your silver in your purse and your wits about you when indulging your vices.”

The soldier snorted.

“Now you tell me. Where were you with your sage advice last night when it would have been more useful.”

Chris stopped shaving for a moment and looked evenly at his long-time friend and companion.

“Would you have listened to me?”

Buck had the good grace to grin.

“You could have tried anyway.”

The Breton scraped the thinly bladed razor down his cheek.

“Do you think he will join us?”

The man-at-arms lifted the kettle from the trivet over the fire and poured some into the tea pot and the rest into Chris’ wash bowl.

“Ezra is very much his own man, Chris. He may throw in his lot with us but he is used to working alone. You know he has just returned from the Eastern marches?”

“I heard something to that effect. He is a spy then?”

“Aye. He fights a different fight to us, Chris.”

“But fights nevertheless.”

“In his own way, and for his own reasons.” He glanced expectantly at the knight. “And the mercenary?”

“Vin will stay while he is needed. I have his word on it.”

“We can count on Mairè, but that is still only five. A small band indeed, sir knight.”

Chris doused his head and rinsed his face and chest before reaching for the rough towel Buck had placed beside the bowl.

“I mean to speak with the druid today. The priest has a proposition but did not wish to speak of it last night. I believe he too will accompany us and his talents could be of great value.”

“Agreed. What of the boy then?”

The Breton shrugged into his linen undershirt and laughed.

“A babe-in-arms, Buck, who wants to scrap with the bigger boys. He is untried and I will not condone taking a boy into battle to do the job of a man.”

“He’s eager,” countered Buck, “you have to give him that.”

Chris finished buckling his sword belt and bent to pull on his boots.

“The gravemounds are full of eager young men who did not know enough to keep their heads attached to their bodies. I do not wish to be responsible for one more.”

“He will be conscripted anyway once the real fighting begins. It would be a shame not to put all that energy to good use.”

"Then you take him on, Buck. If you wish to train a squire then I shall not interfere, but don't expect any help from me or indeed any sympathy when you find you have opened the lid of something which you are then unable to close."

Buck grinned suddenly.

"I feel in need of a challenge."

"Then consider yourself challenged but I warn you, he is your responsibility."

Jeh-Di was certain he would never lift his arm again. It felt as if it had turned to jelly and he was sure the sword in his hand weighed more than a blacksmith's anvil. His face flamed as the Ranger's mocking laughter rang out across the courtyard.

"I fear the war may be over and done by the time this lad can defend himself let alone press an attack."

Pride stung, Jeh-Di turned heatedly to the finely dressed man leaning easily against the water pump.

"At least this is a real sword, not a fancy pig-sticker just for show."

Buck sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. If the boy had to learn the hard way then so be it. The Ranger straightened, launching himself fluidly from his leaning post and raised an eyebrow at the sweating youth.

"Pig sticker, eh?" He moved forward, an amused smile on his face. "A test then, apprentice knight. Your war sword against my decorative 'pig-sticker'."

"Ezra..."

The man held up a hand.

"No. Let the boy speak. He must learn to be able to follow a challenge through."

Jeh-Di glanced quickly at Buck, his expression uncertain. Ezra's confidence unnerved him in spite of the flimsy appearance of the rapier he wore at his side, and Jeh-Di's own conviction that the power his own sword would prevail was questionable.

"Buck?"

The man-at-arms waved a hand at his charge.

"As the man says, put your money where your mouth is or don't speak."

The former mage's apprentice squared his shoulders and raised his sword arm, anticipation suddenly charging his muscles with renewed energy. By comparison, Ezra seemed almost languid, but when he drew his sword Jeh-Di recognised a fluid and dangerous grace in his movements.

“The man to draw first blood wins.”

“Blood?”

Ezra laughed again and moved a step sideways.

“Indeed. Rules of combat. Unless of course you wish to fight to the death. No? First blood it is then.”

Jeh-Di had never felt so foolish. The Ranger was playing with him, darting under his defences, easily trapping his blade with a curious device he wielded in his left hand resembling a dagger with three tines, and tapping him with the edge of his sword although Jeh-Di knew he could have blooded him within the first half-minute. He was tiring quickly, the weight of the heavy war sword becoming a liability against the lightning fast rapier blade, which Ezra thrust so easily under and around his own attack. Jeh-Di found himself falling back, his movements clumsy and largely defensive, as Ezra made a mockery of his limited skills. A surge of anger that the Ranger was still laughing at him allowed him to press a retaliatory attack with renewed vigour, if no great talent, and for a moment the man was forced to defend. Jeh-Di’s euphoria, however, rapidly evaporated as the Ranger, in a movement that stunned the young man, threw his sword in the air, switched the trident blade to his right hand and caught the rapier in his left before lunging under his guard and slicing a stinging cut across his upper arm. Ezra had stepped back and sheathed his sword before Jeh-Di even realised that blood had been drawn.

Open-mouthed with shock, Jeh-Di clamped a hand over his arm, almost surprised to see blood oozing between his fingers. The Ranger, calmly straightening his clothing, leaned back against the water pump barely having raised a sweat.

“I win I believe, young master.” He flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his doublet. “How unfortunate we did not have a wager on the outcome.”

“Reckon that was a foregone conclusion,” snorted Buck, moving forward to look closely at Jeh-Di’s wound. Satisfied it was of minor concern he shook his head and took the war sword from Jeh-Di’s unresisting fingers. “Let that be your first real lesson, lad. Know your opponent, and be sure you can best him before opening your mouth to lay down a challenge. Be thankful it was Ezra you insulted.”

The would-be squire nodded dumbly, then crossed to where the Ranger was inspecting the three bladed weapon for damage. He held out his hand.

“I’m sorry, Ezra. I deserved that.”

Standish inclined his head and grasped Jeh-Di’s wrist.

“A lesson learned well, is a lesson worth having. In future you may not be so ready to judge your opponent by outward appearances and that in itself could just save your life.”

He released his grip on the lad's wrist and grabbed his shoulder, turning him to examine his handiwork. An oblique laceration almost a handspan in length marked a shallow channel in Jeh-Di's upper arm. Ezra nodded approvingly.

“As I thought. Just a scratch. Get Nathan to tend it and you will be right as rain by tomorrow.”

Jeh-Di nodded and turned to walk away, his shoulders slumped but the Ranger called him back.

“Take heart, Jeh-Di, you did well.”

Buck slapped him on the shoulder, a grin plastered on his face.

“Remember this, lad, and remember it well, Ezra here is a master swordsman. He could have carved your liver out of living flesh, cooked and eaten it before you knew you were dead. Pay heed in future to the man whose weapons or skill you insult.”

Jeh-Di picked up the heavy war sword and looked across at the slim blade hanging at Ezra's hip.

“Maybe I would do better with a rapier?”

Buck cuffed him around the head.

“Better yet, maybe you would do better with a yard broom. A lesson in humility would not go amiss.”

The druid glanced up as a shadow fell across the scroll he was studying. So intent was he on committing its coded stanzas to memory that it took a moment for him to recognise the black-clad figure looming over him. He hurriedly rolled the parchment and slipped the scroll into his voluminous sleeve before rising and sketching a hasty blessing.

“May the Goddess be with you, Sir Knight.”

“And the Great Mother with you,” responded the Breton, half-smiling.

Josiah's laugh rumbled from the depths of his chest.

“I trust our theological differences will not in any way temper your opinion of me.”

Chris shook his head and rested his hand on his sword hilt.

“Priest, I have been on this earth long enough to realise that one should keep an open mind about all things spiritual and to understand that there are many things which

defy rational explanation. Be assured I have no prejudices when it comes to a man's preference for his deity."

"By the Goddess, I never thought to hear such from the lips of a Church knight!"

The paladin laughed.

"And likely not to hear again. The Church Elders have devised a singularly unpleasant punishment for blasphemers which I care not to sample."

Josiah extended a hand and rested it on Chris' arm.

"Come, let us walk. I have much I need to discuss with you, but be warned, you will have need of that open mind of which you spoke."

The two men walked slowly out of the inn's yard and towards the waterfront, the plain, unadorned white robe of the tree-priest in direct contrast to the black garb of the knight with its thread-of-silver needlework and silver studded armour.

Mairè looked up from her work and watched the Breton leave with the druid, a thoughtful look on her face as she automatically continued to run the whetstone down her blade with a soft hiss. Her expression softened as she thought back to the previous afternoon in the bathhouse. By the Goddess but the man was a worthy stud partner! When her time came, the fates willing, she would seek him out to father her child.

"I see you, Warrior."

She turned quickly and smiled at the man who had approached quietly enough to catch her unawares, a rare occurrence indeed and as such worthy of note.

"I see you, Ranger. I shall call you Wind Walker, for your tread is as soft and silent as the breeze that passes."

"Such a name honours me, Warrior, so shall it be between us."

Mairè put down the sword on the wooden block and sat down on the bench.

"You know both our ways and the way of our speech, Wind Walker. I would know more of this."

Ezra rested one foot on the edge of the bench and leaned an elbow on his bent knee.

"I am both known and welcome at Fen Gellydd. You know of Morganna Og Llyn?"

Mairè stood up and slowly reached out to place a hand on his shoulder, searching his face.

"You are Myfanwy's sire. Yes, I can see she has your eyes."

He smiled and she released him.

"Morganna is well?"

“Aye, my former Sister-Warrior is well. She misses the way of the sword but her path has now changed direction and she is one of the clan mothers,” she raised an eyebrow, “thanks to you it would seem.”

The Ranger bowed theatrically. “It was my pleasure.”

The Fen Warrior picked up her sword again and began to caress the blade with the whetstone once more, pausing only to glance at the man she had named Wind Walker, with a hint of a smile on her lips.

“Oh, I’m sure it was.”

Jeh-Di swung the axe feeling his shoulder muscles tense as he brought the blade down in a shining arc. The blade landed true and split the log in one stroke, the two halves falling from the chopping block to land with several dozen others. Sighing, he positioned another log and readied himself for the swing. Chopping wood! Whatever Buck said about it improving his stamina and his swing it was still menial labour. He thought to leave such chores behind when he shunned the life of a mage but he was beginning to realise that whatever vocation he chose it would necessitate more sweat than glory.

To pass the time he began to imagine that the logs were enemies to be slain; each satisfying thunk of his axe into the block an execution, each piece of wood a head separated from a body. The axe became an extension of his arm and he adopted a rhythm that became as natural as breathing as time after time he split the hardwood as if it were the most malleable flesh. Finally, he halted, his blood thrumming in his veins from the exertion, the woodpile reduced to kindling.

He flushed as he realised he had been watched, and the watcher was now applauding. Hell’s teeth! Why did everyone feel the need to make fun of him?

“Bravo, lad. Such a swing I have not seen in a while. You have the arm and the aim of a born axeman.”

Jeh-Di looked at the wood axe and back to the mercenary, convinced he was the butt of some joke he did not quite understand.

“Have your fun, Soldier. Everyone else thinks I’m a joke.”

Vin laughed and reached for his own twin-bladed battle-axe.

“No, Jeh-Di, it was a compliment in truth.” He swung the blade until it hummed, then slipped the leather thong from his wrist and offered it up to the former apprentice mage. “I think you may find this a weapon more to your liking, lad.”

Jeh-Di tested the weight of the weapon and remembered how easily he had thrown this self-same axe, how natural the action had seemed as he had hurled it into the tree beside the river.

“Go on,” urged the mercenary, “You cannot hurt it. Let me see how well you can throw.”

The younger man searched for a target and indicated the woodshed door. Vin nodded, watching as Jeh-Di drew back for the throw.

The finely balanced twin-bladed axe flew threw the air as straight as a bolt from a crossbow, unerringly towards its destination. Jeh-Di’s heart stopped in his chest as he saw the door of the woodshed start to open. Powerless to stop the flight of the axe he stood open-mouthed as Buck swung the door open, oblivious to the threat speeding towards him while he adjusted his clothing. The axe struck the door frame a handspan from the man-at-arms’ head, the blade sinking deep into the wood with a satisfying thud, the haft quivering from the shock of impact. Buck’s head slowly came up and Jeh-Di heard a muffled scream from within the wooden structure, indicating that the man-at-arms had not been in the shed to count cordwood. For a moment the knight’s lieutenant stared at the battle-axe embedded in the door frame then switched his attention to the still stunned youth standing empty-handed and pale-faced by the chopping block.

“JEH-DI!”

The last thing the would-be squire heard was the sound of Vin’s laughter echoing across the yard as he took flight, praying the man-at-arms would not be able to catch him.

Still grinning, Vin strode across the courtyard and with a practiced flick of the wrist freed the axe, acknowledging its deep bite into the wooden frame. Testing the edge with his thumb, he casually glanced at the flustered man-at-arms still struggling to properly lace his pants while attempting to disengage himself from the clutches of the woman with whom he had been sharing a stolen moment in the woodshed. The mercenary hardly knew Buck but it was quite evident that he had a definite predilection for the pleasures of the flesh, and the Church knight’s trusted lieutenant seemed to have no difficulty in procuring a willing partner with whom to share his carnal desires. The young wench ducked her head; blushing under Vin’s calculating appraisal and adjusting her bodice, she slipped out into the yard and fled towards the relatively safe haven of the inn.

“Gods and thunder!” cursed Buck, “That rascalion damn near took my ear off!”

The mercenary shook his head and leaned against the shed watching the man-at-arms carefully.

“You could do worse than train the lad to the axe. He has a fair talent for it and that’s a fact.”

Buck tilted his head to one side and let his gaze drop to the ornately decorated double-bladed battle axe that the mercenary so casually hafted.

“No offence, Vin but while I agree that in your capable hands it is a formidable weapon, I’ll still put my money on a bastard sword.”

Putting some distance between himself and the shed, Vin whirled the axe easily in a figure of eight, its blades whistling cleanly through the air, then with a snap of the wrist sent it thudding into the frame again.

“Really? I’ve yet to see a swordsman who can wield a blade once his hand has been lopped off.”

Buck laughed.

“Granted, but you’re no novice at swordplay either from my observation.”

Vin secured the weapon and nodded at the compliment.

“In my trade it’s a foolish man who relies on but one weapon. I take whatever I can find upon the battle field, for needs must when the demons drive.”

Buck chewed thoughtfully on the ends of his mustache and looked keenly at the soldier.

“You may have the right of it, Vin, and yet I have no skill with the axe.”

“Then let it fall upon me to teach the lad what I know. Between us he may learn enough to keep his head upon his shoulders at least a while longer.”

Wilmington chuckled.

“At least until Chris finds him underfoot. The Ranger has already given young Jeh-Di his first lesson in humility and the danger of underestimating an adversary.”

Vin raised a questioning eyebrow.

“The man has a masterful touch with that rapier of his,” continued Buck, “and he fights as well with a blade dexter or sinister.”

“And I’ll warrant that one has more up his sleeve than an a spare set of dice,” agreed Vin, as the two men started to walk towards the tavern, “A cunning and dangerous man indeed.”

“Aye, the iron fist in the doeskin glove.”

“And as venal and unprincipled as any of my trade,” the mercenary commented acidly, “but enough of my carping. There is work to be done.”

The two soldiers parted company, neither man aware that they had been the subject of the Ranger’s scrutiny for some time as, unseen, he lounged comfortably in the hayloft, viewing the inn’s courtyard from his fragrant eyrie while indulging his fondness for well aged plum brandy. The man’s smile was almost feral as he watched the pair separate, keeping his eye on the lean mercenary and recognising in him a fellow predator. He uncorked the silver flask and took a draught of the fiery spirit. Likely one day the soldier would find out exactly what he carried up his sleeve.

The Breton stood with one foot planted on a capstan, his right forearm resting across his thigh as he stared thoughtfully across the harbour.

“Are you telling me that the mercenary has been in the Halls of the Dead and has returned unharmed?”

“It was a near thing, my Lord,” confessed the druid, “and indeed a miracle that he escaped unscathed.”

Chris grinned crookedly. “Yet now you propose that I should attempt the same journey?”

Josiah sat on an upturned coracle and rested on his staff, accepting the irony of his request.

“I am asking that the two of you go into the Halls together, united in strength and purpose, for it is only by taking this path that we have any hope of success against Lord Gris. Your conventional army, even should you be able to raise the manpower in time, will never prevail against the tyrant.”

“You are so sure of this?”

“Chris, hear me and listen well. Lord Gris’ unholy power is being drawn from the Nether World through a human conduit. A Seer. He cannot be beaten by men alone however great their courage or strong their faith.”

“The Church Elders would disagree with you there, my friend.”

“And what say you, Knight of the Sword?”

“I say show me proof, Mage. My faith only goes so far.”

“If your mind is as open as you claim it to be then I shall have no difficulty in persuading you that the cause is a just one, however the mercenary is afraid to return to

the Halls and this quest cannot succeed without your combined strength and faith to sustain you.”

“You paint a dire and chill picture, priest. Yet you are certain that this is the only way.”

“My son, this may sound presumptuous but the fate of the world may rest in your hands. Yours and those of the mercenary.”

Chris shook his head, not believing but neither daring to disbelieve.

“The prophecy of which you spoke?”

“One and the same. If you are willing I will give you your proof but be warned, the trial is not without its dangers and you must enter this agreement with a pure heart and a clear mind. I tell you not only this, that your faith will be taxed beyond measure but also that if one of you falls or fails, then you will both perish.”

The paladin straightened and walked a few paces away, his hand resting on the massive sword at his side. After a few minutes he turned and stared levelly at the druid.

“Convince me that there is no other way, Josiah and I will go.”

“Then we must prepare, Chris. By the rising of the moon tonight I would have your answer.”

“Then so be it, priest. What must I do?”

Josiah stood slowly and leaned on his yew staff.

“You must pray to your Great Mother that I am right.”

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The Galalan knew his worth as a soldier. He also knew his limitations. Ten years of fighting other men’s battles had taught him at least that much. Even the other memories that now infiltrated his own could not alter the truth that he was first and foremost a mercenary; a man who made a living out of war. He had fought the length and breadth of the continent, had served in far off lands and had killed more men than he cared to recollect but they had always been flesh and blood. He turned to the Breton knight and easily met his even stare.

“Josiah has already spoken to me of this madness. And believe me, madness it is. I have been to the Other Side and once is more than enough! I cannot do it.”

“You have already done something that should not be possible, my friend. To walk in the Halls of the Dead and return is no mean feat.”

“That I returned at all is a miracle.” He broke eye contact with the knight and the paladin saw the sudden tremor that ran through the soldier’s body.

Reluctant to pressure the mercenary further, and recognising that the Galalan needed time -- a luxury not afforded them -- he rose from the only chair in the room and moved to the door, slowly raising the catch.

“As you say. But think on this. If what the druid says is true then you and I may well be the last chance that Almaric has to make a stand before the might of Lord Gris and his unholy army.”

The black clad knight slipped silently out into the hall, softly closing the door behind him, and leaving the Galalan in state of confused indecision. With a heavy sigh he struck the oaken window shutter with his closed fist. He, a hired sword willing to fight for any man’s coin, had refused the Queen’s Champion.

The Breton had been walking for some time, lost in his own thoughts, when he realised that his random wanderings had brought him into the plaza before the cathedral. The beautifully ornate architecture tugged at his emotions while prodding at his conscience, reminding him that he had neglected to observe any of the six daily devotions expected of a Church knight since he had left the Tor. He spun on his heel and strode purposefully up the wide steps and towards the embossed doors that gleamed with the rich patina of age and vigorously applied beeswax.

The door yielded easily to his touch and swung open on well-oiled hinges, the familiar odour of incense and cedar wood filling his nostrils and instilling in him a profound sense of calm. He breathed deeply and immediately allowed the tension in his body to drain away, his mind focusing on the time honoured rituals of his Order. Stepping to the plain stone font in the vestibule, he washed his hands in the chill water, performing the traditional cleansing before entering the cathedral proper.

It was early evening, too soon for evensong, yet Chris could hear the rising strains of the majestic harmonium echoing through the empty church. He hesitated, remaining in the shadows as a single voice raised in song filled the cathedral, the singer -- standing on the dais before the altar -- oblivious to his unseen audience.

*Calon lan yn llawn daioni...*A heart that’s pure and full of goodness

*Techach yw na’r lili dlos...*fairer than the beautiful lily;

*‘Does ond calon lan all ganu...*only a heart that’s pure can sing

*Canu'r dydd a chanu'r nos...sing by day and sing by night.*

Moved by the purity of the voice and the poetry of the Fens, weaving around each other to produce a sound of unbelievable beauty, Chris stood transfixed -- bound by the spell the singer had unknowingly cast. *Great Mother but the man could sing!*

The songster continued, his words telling of the rejection of earthly riches and the search for an honest and pure heart, which in themselves would bring eternal gain and as the last note faded the singer dropped to one knee before the altar and briefly bowed his head. Chris' breath caught in his throat at the familiar ritual; the genuflection was a singular mark of the Militant Orders. *By all the gods! A fellow knight then?*

The figure rose and turned to face the body of the church, then slowly walked down the steps to the transept, his right hand lightly resting on the gilded hilt of his rapier as his eyes swept the empty rows of wooden pews. For a moment he hesitated, and tilted his head as if listening then with a slight smile he started down the nave towards the Breton, his stride loose-hipped and arrogant. Gods and Thunder! The Ranger?

At that moment the paladin could indeed have mistaken the man for a knight. Rather than his usual flamboyant and colourful garb he wore a plain, dark blue doublet unmarked by any device, over linen breeches of a like shade and the knee-length boots while polished and of good make, were made for hard riding not merely for show.

Chris moved out of the shadow knowing the Ranger had already marked his presence, his own purpose momentarily thrust aside as he waited for Standish to walk the length of the nave.

"Well met, Sir Knight. It would seem we share a need for spiritual sustenance this evening." Ezra's tone held a note of amusement.

Chris studied the man with a measured gaze and found his look returned with the hint of a challenge in the deep green eyes and in it the acknowledgement of an unspoken but shared understanding. The Breton did not shift his gaze but his stern expression relaxed.

"I believe we have more in common, Ranger than is evident at first glance."

Ezra arched an eyebrow, and the smile that curved his lips did not reach his eyes.

"Some things are best left in the past. You would do well to remember that."

Chris nodded, accepting the man's right to keep his own counsel. A man's past was his own.

"I have no interest beyond the present and I am in need good men."

"I'm no common soldier, Chris."

There was a warning in the words, but L'Arabee was unsure of its intent.

"So I understand."

Ezra lowered his eyes for a moment, his expression thoughtful as his fingers traced the filigree on his sword hilt. After a few moments he straightened and met the knight's gaze once more.

"The road we travel may be the same for a while but I cannot promise that I will stay."

Chris reached out and gripped the Ranger's shoulder. "Promise me this then: a season; remain until the Autumn equinox then you're free to go."

Standish laughed softly.

"Your faith is greater than mine, for I truly doubt that any of us will witness another turn of the seasons, but," he paused, his smile mocking, "for what it's worth I will give you my word to stay. Now if you will excuse me, the dice are calling and I'll wager there are still some willing sheep to be fleeced."

The Ranger made an abrupt half-turn and hastened into the vestibule, his passage so silent that the breeze which stirred the tapestry across the doorway was the only indication that he had left the cathedral. Chris stared for a long moment at the swaying curtain thinking that to try and harness the Ranger was to try and reap the wind; yet, he would make the attempt. Such a man was too valuable to lose.

With a sigh he moved purposefully towards the altar and, recognising the irony, emulated the Ranger's earlier actions and dipped one knee to touch the floor. Bowing his head as he intoned the *salutat*, he contemplated the fact that in less than a candlemark he would be joining the druid in another form of worship and hoped that indeed the Great Mother would forgive his necessary duplicity.

The Breton first stared keenly at the druid then at the expectant faces around the table in the inn. Buck was smiling behind his hand, aware that Chris had been outmanoeuvred by the wily priest while Vin just shook his head, having experienced first hand some of the druid's methods.

"A trance?" Chris repeated slowly. "You intend to render me insensible?"

"Merely a deep sleep, I assure you. Vin knows of this but the sleep he endured was one of healing, yours will be one of vision."

Chris switched his gaze to the mercenary but Vin quickly got up from the table and stalked away.

"I want no part of your trickery, priest. You do as you will, Chris."

Josiah looked sadly after the Galalan before addressing the knight once again.

"I mean you no harm. You will merely sleep and if the Goddess wills it you will see some way into the future. The science is inexact so I can promise you nothing, except that all of us here will stand by you until you return."

Chris paced several steps towards the fireplace, then turned and folded his arms. "Return? Exactly where am I going?"

Inez stood up and bowed her head.

"My Lord. If you are blessed with the gift of the Goddess this night, you will travel the astral planes but your corporeal form will remain here. In the realms of the dreaming the Goddess will grant you a glimpse into the future and then you will know, as I do and as Josiah does, what trials lie ahead of us."

Mairè looked sternly from Inez to Josiah.

"And if harm should befall his body while he is...travelling?"

The mercenary laughed harshly.

"Then he dies!"

Irritated by the outburst, Josiah waved an impatient hand at Vin and stood up, as Chris laid a restraining hand on Mairè silencing any further comment with a shake of his head.

"Chris. I will be honest with you; there is a risk, but we shall be in constant attendance."

L'Arabee let his gaze roam around the assembly before singling out one man. "Ranger. Would you swear to be my guard?"

Ezra graciously inclined his head. "On my honour and with my life."

Chris let his eye linger on the man for a time then nodded.

"Buck? Mairè?"

The two each solemnly gave their word. Finally Chris made eye contact with the Galalan and held his gaze for a moment.

"Vin?"

The mercenary took a deep breath, then nodded slowly. "I give you my sword and my blood."

The paladin's stern face relaxed into a smile and he unstrapped his sword belt, handing the weapon to Jeh-Di.

"Then let's waste no more time."

Inez took the knight by the hand and lead him to a circle chalked in the boards. The device had been cunningly executed, the border a complicated design of which Chris had never seen the like. He took his place in the centre of it and tried to steady a heart beating as fast as if he was about to go into battle. The druid instructed Buck and Ezra to stand behind and to either side of the knight.

“The draught will work quickly and you must be ready to stay his fall, but be warned, you must not touch him before that. I cannot vouch for where your own spirit may wander if you are drawn into the circle before times.”

The Ranger and the man-at-arms exchanged first an enigmatic glance, then shrugging almost in unison traded a quick smile.

Chris took the vial the priest offered him and looked at the cloudy contents. “How long, druid?”

“Your journey may take no more than a hundred-count, or it may be that you do not return for several candlemarks. I cannot say.”

“So be it. I’m placing my trust in you. Pray that you do not fail me.”

He drank the sweet and cloying draught, the taste of honey and clover on his tongue as he started to fall, descending rapidly into the void.

Chris dropped bonelessly, the vial falling from his relaxed fingers as the elixir coursed through his body. Buck and Ezra leapt forward as one to break the paladin’s fall, only just succeeding in preventing the knight crashing to the floor so speedily was his swoon induced.

Still as death, the blond Knight of the Sword barely breathed, his face pale and lips bloodless as he lay on the table guarded by his four sworn protectors. Mairè hovered nervously at his shoulder, her skin as pale and waxen as her Lord’s. At intervals she would touch his cheek, and once or twice she rested a slim hand on his chest to reassure herself that he was indeed alive. Vin watched the Fen warrior closely, wagering that as Chris’ pledged warrior she would be the first to know if any ill befell the knight. Occasionally she exchanged a word or a sign with the Ranger, and he found himself puzzled by the casual intimacy of their relationship. The woman was a fascinating study, the Ranger no less so but Vin suspected that while Mairè was open and honest, Ezra was a trickster at heart and not to be trusted no matter how fine his sword arm.

The candle had burned through a full mark and half way through the next when Mairè suddenly cried out and raised accusing eyes to Josiah.

"Priest! He bleeds. What sorcery is this?"

Summoned by the Fen Warrior's alarm the druid hastened to the table. The knight's pale face was marred by rivulets of blood that streamed from his nose, and his chest started to heave convulsively, as if he struggled for breath.

"I cannot say. We can only wait, for I cannot reverse the process nor call him back."

"Damn your eyes, priest," cursed Vin softly, recalling his own ordeal. "What have you done?"

The Ranger gently wiped the blood from the paladin's face with a linen kerchief. "Enough, Vin. First things first."

The knight stirred, head shifting restlessly as he muttered fretfully in the language of his birth. After a few moments he tensed and uttered a hoarse cry, the veins in his neck standing out as he struggled again to draw air into his lungs while fresh blood ran freely from his nostrils. Ezra glanced at the druid but Josiah shook his head, as powerless as the rest of them to do anything for the distressed knight but look on and wait.

A bare quarter mark later, the agitation subsided and Chris relaxed again, his breathing becoming deep and even, as his colour gradually returned. Nathan slipped a hand inside the knight's shirt and found his heart beating strongly beneath his fingers and a warmth to his flesh that had been absent while he remained in a trance. Slowly at first, the paladin moved his head then heaved a shuddering sigh and moaned softly. Without opening his eyes, he levered himself onto one elbow and dragged his fingers through his short, blond hair.

"Gods and Thunder! I need a drink!"

Chris distractedly wiped away the blood that continued to trickle from one nostril and took another mouthful of extraordinarily fine brandy from the Ranger's silver hip flask before focusing on his audience, every face showing undisguised concern. He waved a dismissive hand, took a final draught of the warming alcohol before handing the flask back, and jumped from the table. Without a word he moved away from the others in long, vigorous strides as if he wanted to put physical distance between himself and what had just transpired. Buck started after him, but hesitated as a slim hand restrained him. Mairè. A single shake of her head stopped any further thought of following the knight.

The Breton stopped in front of the huge fireplace, one booted foot resting on the raised hearth, a hand gripping the mantelpiece, and stared for several minutes into the flames. Finally he turned and levelled a hard stare at the druid.

“What do I have to do, priest?”

Josiah strode forward, his eyes blazing with passion. “You saw!”

“I saw less than I would have hoped and more than I would have wished,” the knight answered, wearily, “and be it dream or prescience, I saw enough to convince me that we have reason to fear the immediate future. Given what I have just witnessed, I believe your plan has merit.”

Vin was the first to move, stalking forward towards the two men, voice raised. “Merit? By all the gods Chris, do you seek death so readily?”

Chris raised sad eyes, to meet those of the Galalan. “No, mercenary, but I do not fear it either. Nor, I know, do you.”

Ezra’s voice carried clearly across the room, his words directed at the two men: “Which of these two masters of man is seeking to command your valour, Life or Death?”

The Breton flicked a glance at the Ranger and smiled. Standish was quoting part of the knight’s creed.

“Choose your master, Vin. Do you wait here for death to seek you out as it surely will, or do we go together into the Other World and meet death on our own terms?”

The Galalan dropped his gaze to the floor, then slowly drew his sword from its sheath, reversing it and offering the hilt to the knight in the traditional way of swearing allegiance, before once again meeting L’Arabee’s eyes.

“On my honour and on my life, I offer you my sword and my blood.”

Chris took the sword, knowing how much it had cost the young mercenary to make the gesture.

“Till time and worlds cease,” he responded quietly, and returned the weapon.

For several emotionally charged moments no one made a sound. The two men stood with hands clasped over the unsheathed blade, eyes locked in silent communion before Chris smiled and released his grip, breaking the solemnity of the moment. He slapped the younger man on the shoulder as Vin slid the sword into its scabbard.

“A drink then, mercenary, to celebrate.”

The Galalan sighed. “Don’t rightly see much to be celebrating. Remember, I’ve been there once.”

Chris grabbed a bottle of karak from the shelf, lined up a row of nine ivory cups and in a single motion filled each with the potent spirit.

“Good, then you can lead the way.”

He picked up two cups, offered one to Vin and waited until the others each held a cup of their own.

“A toast. Victory over death.”

“Victory over death!”

oooOOOooo

The horse was lathered with sweat, bloody flecks of foam at its flared nostrils as it strained to respond to the urgings of its rider. The knight leaned into the animal's neck, fingers twined in the long mane, barely conscious and staying in the saddle only by the power of his will. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, blood having turned the white sword and snake device on his sleeve to crimson and a dozen wounds to his body bled freely, weakening him almost to the point of death but the urgency of his mission gave him the strength to go on.

Through the night the gallant animal ran on, until before dawn at the city gates the exhausted beast collapsed, crashing to the ground and throwing its rider as, mid-stride, its mighty heart burst in its chest. The gatekeeper, sounding the alarm, rushed out to tend the fallen rider appalled at the sight that greeted him. The knight was close to death but as the gatekeeper knelt over him he reached up to clutch the man's jacket and through bloodied lips spoke a name: “L'Arabee. Sir Christiaan...” he drew a shuddering breath, “Tell him, Decouvri...” His head dropped bonelessly against the gatekeeper's supporting arm before he could say more.

Chris was still buckling on his sword as he jogged down the stairs following hard on the heels of the inn-keeper, his face a mask of stone. He would have words with Buck when he finally ran him to ground; the gods knew whose bed he was in because he certainly was not in his own.

“A knight of my order? Are you sure?” Chris brought his errant thoughts back into line and focused on the nightshirted innkeeper in front of him.

“That's what the gatekeeper said, Sir. Rode in not a quarter mark ago, as if all the demons of the underworld were after him. Horse died right in front of the gate -- ridden to the death.”

“The knight? He still lives?”

“Aye, but barely by all accounts. Asked for you by name: Sir Christiaan.”

The Breton's heart sank. Few would know of his whereabouts save the knights he had sent on ahead to muster an army. Which one of these had returned to him in such dire straits and what tidings were of such import that a Knight of the Sword would ride his steed to death?

"Where is he?"

The innkeeper unbarred the door and raised his lantern. "They have taken him to the apothecary. Jack will show you the way."

Jack, a lean and pimply youth, who resembled a badly made scarecrow, emerged from the shadows and tugged his forelock in deference to the paladin.

The knight nodded his acknowledgement and gripped a bony shoulder with his fingers.

"Hurry, boy. There is little time to waste."

Jack swallowed noisily and bobbed his head, reminding Chris of nothing so much as a turkey, before setting off at a lope down the shadowy street. The knight, in spite of his urging for speed, found it a challenge to keep up with the youth who showed a surprising fleetness of foot. Breathing hard, Chris diligently pursued the barefooted lad, his own booted footsteps ringing hollowly across the cobbled street.

The docks were alive with movement and sound, and redolent with a *mélange* of rotted fish, sewage, tar and the salted tang of the sea. Chris slowed his pace, his senses alert. Church knight or not, there were men here who would slit his belly for nothing more than the pleasure of it. Lurking shadows altered subtly in shape in the periphery of his vision and he knew that he was being watched, summed up as a worthy mark. His hand closed over the hilt of his sword. The cutpurse who fingered Chris L'Arabee as an easy touch would soon learn his lesson at the business end of a blade.

The scarecrow had stopped and Chris noticed that they were in front of a chandler's store. Wordlessly the boy pointed to the upper storey, winked and disappeared, leaving the knight alone. The Breton cautiously followed the rickety wooden stairs that lead up the side of the building to the second floor of the chandler's business. A small sign attached to the plank wall advised him that this was indeed the workplace of Nathan the Apothecary. Without knocking, he pushed open the door and entered a dim, smoky room, his nostrils immediately flaring at the rank smell of blood that over-rode the more subtle scents of Nathan's pharmacopoeia, his eyes searching the shadowed depths.

The apothecary spared a brief moment to acknowledge Chris' arrival before silently returning to his ministrations. Chris shifted his gaze from the bowl of blood-soaked cloths

at the Moor's right hand to the familiar livery of the man he was tending. No mistake then. One of his brethren. He covered the remaining distance to the knight in a heartbeat and dropped to one knee beside the rough litter on which he lay. The Breton exhaled slowly and closed his eyes, bowing his head in undisguised sorrow.

"Decouvrir." He barely breathed the name, his throat too constricted to voice his true anguish.

The gravely injured Galalan knight opened heavy-lidded eyes and reached a bloodied hand towards Chris, his fingers clutching urgently at the paladin's sleeve.

"Chris." The single word seemed to drain him of all energy and the dark eyes clouded with pain but the force of his grip on L'Arabee's arm did not lessen. "All is lost...all dead. Slaughtered."

The blond knight was under no illusion that this man, his lifelong friend and ally, was about to join those of whom he spoke, his mute appeal to the healer gaining him no more than a shake of the Moor's head. No hope. Decouvrir struggled to pull himself up and Chris slid a supporting arm under his shoulders, feeling the sticky wetness of congealing blood on his skin from the knight's many wounds. The grip on his sleeve tightened, urgent fingers seeking his wrist and closing with surprising strength around the Breton's arm.

"No time, Chris. They follow, less than a day behind."

"Lord Gris?" Chris' gut clenched, a thrill of apprehension sending a surge of energy through his veins. But a day away?

"They move with the wind. You must...make a stand."

He coughed wetly, choking as bright blood welled from his between his lips. Chris gently disengaged his wrist from the knight's weakening grip and instead took his hand in his own, their fingers interlacing. Make a stand? How could he tell a man who had sacrificed his life that there could be no stand, no challenge to the might of the invading Ragnathan's. He was but one man, with no army behind him, just a handful of mismatched warriors; no match for the overwhelming might of Lord Gris.

"Decouvrir," he prompted softly, "What of Reuter and DeLancy?"

The knight sighed, his breath gurgling in his chest.

"The Order of the Sword...is no more." It was hard for him to speak, the words coming in short bursts as he fought for every breath. He stiffened, his back arching against the arm supporting him, and clutched Chris' hand with all the strength he could muster, "You are...the last...my brother."

The Galalan heaved a last shuddering gasp, no longer able to draw air into his blood-filled lungs, his tenuous hold on life slipping rapidly away. Chris bent his head and pulled his friend close against his chest, a last embrace -- the final farewell -- powerless to anything more than watch as his friend breathed his last. Holding the lifeless form he squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the pain and sorrow that threatened to overwhelm him, his sense of loss so acute that he was barely able to keep the tears that pricked at his eyes in check.

The Breton did not know how much time had passed before he became aware of a hand on his arm and the Moor's voice coaxing him to release the dead knight. Chris reluctantly allowed his grip to slacken and gently lay the Galalan down.

"You were the best of them all, my friend." His whisper was choked with emotion as he looked one last time on the knight's face before rising to his feet and slowly turning away, his grief weighing heavily upon him. "May you find eternal peace."

Chris' tread echoed noisily down the street as the first light of the new day spread questing fingers over the horizon. Distracted he barely noticed the hovering shapes lurking in the shadows that drew back at his approach, recognising in the black clad knight an aura of power and menace that none were prepared to challenge. Instead his mind was focused inwardly, his grief rapidly giving way before a greater emotion -- that of rage.

*You are the last.*

"BUCK!"

The man-at-arms would have easily heard the Breton roaring his name if he had been in the next kingdom; as it was he was merely in the next room, still in bed. Granted not his own but, for all that, not so far that Chris needed to rouse the entire inn.

"BUCK!"

He knew that tone well. Chris was not pleased. And when Chris was not pleased someone would pay the price of his anger. He hardly needed to be a seer to understand that under the circumstances that someone was most likely to be him. With the speed of a King's courier he threw aside the covers, ignoring the squeal of protest from his doxy, and hastily pulled on his pants and boots, pausing just long enough to grab the rest of his clothes and his weapons before charging out of the door and into the hall.

He groaned as Chris raised his voice for the third time and, tripping over his sword in his hurry, burst into the room where the paladin stood hard-faced, with his arms folded, exuding an aura of cold fury.

“Great Mother, Chris! What’s wrong? Where’s the fire?”

“If for once you were not responding to your baser instincts and rutting like a dog with any bitch you can find you would already know!” The Breton’s voice cracked like a whip. “You would know that less than a candlemark ago a messenger arrived in the city, horse and rider done to death!”

Buck struggled to dress, confused by Chris’ uncharacteristically irrational behaviour and unsure of what he was expected to do to remedy the situation. His frantic actions suddenly slowed as he became aware of something other than anger reflected in the knight’s rigid bearing.

“Chris?” His voice was quiet, reasonable, enquiring. A whole range of questions couched in that one syllable.

The blond man’s shoulders suddenly slumped and he turned away, wordlessly starting to pack his few belongings into his saddle bags.

“Decouvrir is dead,” he sighed after a few minutes’ silence, “They are all dead. We stand alone.”

Buck cinched his sword-belt in place.

“What?”

“There is no army. There will be no army.” He stopped and sighed, his face reflecting his despair. “I have failed.”

“Not admission I would have expected from the Royal Protector, First Knight of the Sword and Queen’s favourite.”

Both men turned in surprise at the sound of another voice, to find the Ranger leaning nonchalantly against the door frame, already dressed for travelling in the same midnight blue livery that Chris had seen him wearing in the cathedral. The persistent feeling that it should mean something to him hovered at the periphery of the Breton’s awareness but any relevance it may have continued to elude him; a lurking shadow always just out of reach.

“Going somewhere, Ezra?”

“I’d like to say, as far away from this misbegotten and soon to be forgotten territory as possible, however I seem to recall offering you my sword and in spite of the apparent reversal in fortunes for Almaric, my offer still stands.”

L'Arabee stared thoughtfully at the Ranger for several heartbeats then nodded.

"You may have chosen to join a lost cause, my friend, but your sword arm is welcome although I fear where Vin and I must now go, none can follow."

"That remains to be seen, Sir," replied Ezra cryptically, thrusting himself away from the doorjamb and pulling his cloak around him. "Now with your permission I'll summon the others, I believe we have but little time in which to take action."

Buck watched Standish leave and quickly turned his attention back to the blond knight.

"I don't know that I'd trust him, Chris. There's something about him. Too...clever by half. He knows too much and he...he's like a fox, all the time skulking behind but when you turn around to see what's following you he's already two steps in front!"

"He's a Ranger, Buck. A spy. That's what he does, and besides I don't have the luxury of being selective," he smiled briefly, "else why would I put up with you? We have few enough who would rally to our side, would you have me refuse the aid of those who do so willingly?"

The Breton cast a last glance around the room then with a sigh picked up his saddlebags.

"Get the horses. I'll find the priest. Ezra's right about one thing; if we don't act now, it may be too late." He clapped a hand over his lieutenant's shoulder with a sadly resigned smile. "It may well be too late anyway."

The eight companions formed a loose flying wedge as they urged their already straining horses on to greater speed across the open plains of Almaric towards the circle of standing stones in the distance, an impressive sight to behold against the newly risen sun. In the lead Chris' mighty warhorse set the pace, an unrelenting ground-eating stride that the others had no choice but to follow. Mile after mile they rode, driven by the knowledge that nothing now stood between the might of Ragnatha and the last bastion of the Free Kingdoms.

The massive and ancient construction loomed before them, rising out of the plain like silent sentinels of stone, a cold, cheerless place of keening wind that chilled the body and the spirit. Yet this was their destination and their trust in the druid was absolute -- they could not fail.

The Breton's abruptly raised arm signalled an end to the ride and before the others had reined their mounts in, he had dismounted to stand and study, with grim fascination,

the pagan structure before him. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stirred and the shiver that ran icy fingers down his spine had nothing to do with the cold wind that plucked at his clothing and ruffled his hair. There was ancient power here. He sensed the presence of another beside him and without taking his eyes from the starkly imposing edifice he knew it to be the mercenary.

“Second thoughts, soldier?”

“And third and fourth...”

Chris laughed softly and turned to look into a pair of ice blue eyes, hardened to sapphires by a determination that the knight recognised well enough as being a reflection of his own resolve. Resting his hand on his sword, he felt the reassuring solidarity of cold metal on his skin as his palm caressed the unadorned pommel. He was a knight, a warrior, and the sword was his tool of trade no less than the mercenary’s. Wherein then the difference? Did the blessing of the Church make a man any less dead when he was impaled on a knight’s blade? Turning his gaze back to the circle of stones he bowed his head for a moment. *You are the last.*

“No less than I then, yet still we will go.”

Vin nodded slowly. “Aye. For better or worse, my friend, we go.”

The Breton sighed and pulled on his gloves. “Have faith.”

“Oh, I do.” The Galalan grinned suddenly. “Faith in my right arm, my sword and my own abilities.”

“And me? Do I enter into the equation?”

The mercenary levelled an appraising look at the imposing blond knight, silver shining on black, the snake and sword device on his sleeve rippling with every movement of the paladin’s arm, and his face became serious.

“I’m counting on you to watch my back.”

The Ranger sat astride his horse, his back to the henge as he stared towards the eastern horizon, never taking his eyes from the undulating line of low hills less than ten miles distant. With one knee hooked casually over the saddle horn, his relaxed posture belied the anxiety that his troubled green eyes betrayed.

“You seek trouble, Wind Walker?”

Ezra rested his forearms across his crooked knee, the reins hanging loosely from his fingers, and cast an amused sidelong glance at the Fen warrior who had appeared at his side.

“It does the seeking, Mairè and will find us soon enough I’ll warrant.”

She kneeed her mount closer and followed his gaze. “I care not for this waiting. Should we not at least...”

Ezra held up one hand. “You know what Chris said as well as I. No sortie.”

She tossed her head, the long braid of blonde hair twitching with the eloquence of a cat’s tail.

“This is no way for warriors to fight!” she snapped, impatiently, “We allow ourselves to be cornered like rats in a trap.”

The Ranger reached out and grasped her hand, quickly moving his fingers in an intricate pattern as he signed a message in the Fen warrior language, imprinting as it were the words on her skin. She met his eyes for a moment then pulled her hand away.

“You use my pledge against me, Ranger,” she accused softly, and wheeled her horse in a tight circle before glancing back over her shoulder as she kicked the animal into a canter. “Morganna chose well, Wind Walker.”

Ezra smiled, then sighed and resumed his vigil. She was right. They were vulnerable and their very survival depended on nothing more than the tricks of a mage. His hand fell unconsciously to his sword and not for the first time he wondered why he had so readily thrown in his lot with the black liveried Knight of the Sword, when he could just as easily have followed his original intent and bought passage for the Isles on a fast barque out of Missa. Slowly he raised a hand to his collar and drew out the fine link chain on which hung a gold ring. A ring without embellishment and set with a single black pearl, cunningly worked in the shape of a rose, which until a year ago had adorned the middle finger of his left hand. Standish tugged thoughtfully on the heavy piece of jewellery, sliding it back and forth along the gold chain before finally tucking it back beneath his doublet. No. Down that road lay only sorrow. Some things were best left only in memory.

Chris had finally ceased his restless pacing to watch the druid prepare the altar stone. At the back of his mind he wondered how the Church Elders would feel if they knew that their premier knight was a willing participant in pagan practices long forbidden to the brotherhood and discovered that he found the prospect mildly amusing. Still, he had always harboured a streak of irreverence that had often found him hauled in disgrace before the Preceptor when he was a novice, and not a great deal had changed over the years. Into middle-age and still causing a stir in the upper echelons of the Church hierarchy.

With a sigh, Chris looked at the mercenary, almost a decade younger than himself, who sat leaning pensively against one of the standing stones. He knew the soldier had real doubts about what they were about to do -- by the Great Mother he had enough doubts of his own -- but had put all uncertainties aside to join him in a venture with no predictable outcome. He looked beyond the ring of standing stones to the lone figure on horseback. The Ranger. Yet another who had stayed when he could well have turned his back. He saw Ezra straighten and unhook his leg from the pommel to sit astride once more, his gaze focused on the far distance, his bearing that of a stag with the scent of the dogs in his nostrils. Following the Ranger's line of sight he walked slowly forward, never taking his eyes off the suddenly fluid horizon, for along the crest of the hills for as far as the eye could see, an undulating line of horsemen had appeared against the skyline. Ezra wheeled his mount and spurred it into a gallop, executing a flying dismount as the horse came to a stiff-legged standstill just within the circle of stones. Throwing the reins over the saddle Standish walked purposefully towards the altar stone.

"Whatever it is you intend doing, priest, I strongly suggest you do it now."

"Blood of the Gods." L'Arabee tore his eyes away from the awesome spectacle of the vanguard of the Ragnathan army ranged for mile upon never ending mile, filling the horizon from end to end. "How much time do we have, Josiah?"

"Enough, but it will be close."

The Ranger, looking relaxed with one hip thrust slightly forward and his hand on his sword hilt, stared for a moment at the ground before raising his eyes to the druid.

"Tell me this, priest, what happens to the rest of us once you have sent our two intrepid pilgrims on their journey to the netherworld? My horse can outrun most things but I have grave doubts that even I can outdistance the entire Ragnathan army."

Josiah picked up a length of multi-coloured braid and glanced at Ezra, before gesturing for Chris and Vin to come forward.

"You have my word that you will be safe here. I will place a ward around the henge that will keep us under the protection of the Goddess. No-one may enter."

"And," responded Ezra quietly, immediately focusing on the weakness in the plan, "no-one may leave."

Buck took a step forward, his gaze drawn to the serpentine line of cavalry that would, all too soon, be upon them.

"I don't think leaving is an option, Ezra. Perhaps you should have caught that ship to the Isles when you had the chance."

The Ranger shrugged, not rising to the man-at-arms' less than subtle innuendo.

"We have all made choices that have brought us here for one reason or another. My concern is not that I am here, but that I might never leave." He folded his arms and allowed the suggestion of a smile to linger for a moment on his lips. "Unless, of course you have plans to spirit the rest of us away as well."

Josiah sighed heavily.

"No, Ezra. You have the right of it. Once Chris and Vin are sent on their way, we must remain. If any should disturb their physical forms, they may never be able to return to this world."

Buck strode forward, sudden agitation spilling over into action, and grabbed the druid by the sleeve.

"We cannot fight an army, priest! These Ragnathan's will be upon us before we know it and we will all be meeting on the Other Side, with or without your magic!"

Josiah calmly fingered the coloured braid in his hands.

"Have faith, Brother. I have promised you that we will be safe here. No one will see this place or any held within its circle but if you have doubts then by all means leave and take your chances with Lord Gris."

"At least we could make a fight of it," interjected Mairè, impatiently, "Must we take only your word that you can do this thing?"

"Enough!" the Breton snapped, the commanding roar of his voice immediately silencing the growing dissent. "Go or stay, but make your choice and make it now!" He bowed his head for a moment then straightening, looked resolutely at the waiting druid. "Let's do this before even my courage deserts me."

Josiah nodded once. "I am ready if you are."

The two men stood at the foot of the altar, left shoulder to left shoulder facing in opposite directions. Soldiers both -- first knight of the realm and soldier of fortune -- sworn to fight as one. They were bonded; united by not only the length of cord that physically encircled their upper arms but by an oath that bound one to the other in spirit beyond time and tide -- beyond even life itself.

The druid completed the brief ritual.

"...Thus shall it be, ever and on, till the world's end."

Knight and mercenary exchanged a mischievously sceptical glance.

“This doesn’t mean we’re wedded or anything does it?” whispered Vin, eyes dancing with suppressed laughter but nevertheless obviously discomfited by the whole ceremony that physically bound him to the blond Breton.

Chris responded with a grin which he quickly masked under Josiah’s fiercely intimidating glare, guiltily thinking that even in a religion not his own he had somehow succeeded in being irreverent. Decouvrir would, without a doubt, have been proud of him. The unbidden memory of his fellow knight’s death, still fresh in his mind, opened the way to renewed grief at his loss, until now necessarily pushed to the back of his mind, and he found it difficult to swallow past the sudden constriction in his throat.

“Chris?”

The druid’s voice drew him sharply back and he understood that the priest had asked him if he was ready. He spared a last glance around the tight-knit circle of companions ringing the altar stone. Even the horses had already been brought within the protection of the circle of stones and now stamped restlessly, tack and harness jingling musically as they bent to crop the lush grass. He let his gaze linger on Mairè, the Fen warrior, feeling her pain at his leaving. She signed: *Would that I could go with you.* He raised his right hand and responded. *You are with me always.* He was ready.

The Breton closed his eyes, sickeningly vertiginous, as the scene before him unexpectedly blurred and shifted, and a rushing wind sounded hollowly in his ears. He felt tense fingers grip his own and responded in kind as he felt reality inexorably slipping away and a frighteningly chill darkness descending over his mind like a malevolent cloud.

Chris staggered to his feet, still dizzy, and feeling the familiar unpleasant trickle of blood from his nostrils, he impatiently dashed the back of one hand across his upper lip. Gods and Thunder was this going to be a permanent affliction? He shivered at the icy wind that swept around the echoing vault and plucked at his sleeves, scanning the vast hall for any sign of Vin. While they had been physically linked in the real world -- bound by Josiah’s length of cord -- here, he guessed, the association was more tenuous, a spiritual bond. The Great Mother grant that it was not dependent on faith alone!

“Vin!”

His voice resounded hollowly, reverberating off the stone walls to almost mock him as the echoes died away to silence. He sniffed and wiped his nose again, smearing blood across the back of his hand before walking some little distance towards the

massive doors at one end of the hall. Nothing. With a sigh, he strode back to the granite plinth on which he had awakened, shocked to find the image of himself still lying in repose. Deciding that the whole enterprise was becoming too bizarre, he quickly turned his back on what looked suspiciously like his own corpse and once again set about finding his mercenary friend.

The air positively crackled with energy and at the extreme limit of the hall he could make out a shimmering light surrounding the great doors that he had not noticed the first time he had looked towards them. Raising his voice once more, he shouted the young soldier's name.

"Vin!"

"You don't have to shout, I'm right here."

Chris spun in surprise to find the smiling mercenary striding towards him from the opposite end of the cavernous hall.

"By the blood of the seven martyrs, Vin, where did you spring from?"

The Galalan gestured casually behind him.

"Oh, about a dozen crypts over from you," he quipped lightly, "I must say, you make a very fine-looking corpse, Chris."

L'Arabee frowned and found himself shivering from more than the icy chill that swirled endlessly through the vault.

"Don't even jest about it. It's difficult enough for me to come to terms with leaving myself behind at the stone circle without finding my cadaver already waiting for me here!"

Vin laughed, an incongruous sound for the Halls of the Dead, and slapped the Breton on the upper arm.

"I told myself that I would not fear this place this time. Dead or not, we are here and we have a job to do."

"Then let's do it."

Ezra was restless, the confines of the warded henge becoming suddenly claustrophobic for the Ranger as Lord Gris' minions drew steadily closer. Buck finally grew tired of the continual measured pacing and lobbed a pebble in the man's direction as he passed.

"By the Great Mother, Ezra, you must have worn a moat around this cursed place by now. Can't you sit still for even one tenth of a candlemark?"

The Ranger's cool, green eyes flicked to the man-at-arms.

"Unlike you I see no great value in boring my backside to death by sitting in one place ad infinitum. Of course you, no doubt, have had many opportunities to practice, what with regularly settling your arse for hours on end on a church pew."

Instead of rising to the bait, Buck merely laughed at Standish's words.

"Ah, the cat's out of the bag then? Tell me, has someone been telling the darker secrets of Mother Church, or is that information you've gleaned from your more clandestine operations, Ezra?"

It was said in jest but the Ranger's expression suggested that man-at-arms' barb had succeeded in wounding him, and wordlessly he separated himself from the group and retired to the other side of the circle where he sat alone, his back against one of the uprights.

Mairè fluidly rose from where she had been squatting and stood menacingly over the reclining soldier, one hand on her belt knife.

"Buck, I swear that one day I will cut out your tongue myself!"

He held up one hand in protest. "Now wait a minute! What did I say?"

"Is not your brain connected to your tongue then? It is just as I believed, you speak without thought." She looked across the circle as if debating her next words. "You belittle his skill and disparage his knowledge, Bucklin. What you have only heard by rumour and hearsay concerning what approaches, the Ranger has seen with his own eyes. His fears are not merely shadows of the dark dreams of night, they are real -- and they are here! Think well on it, Soldier!"

The Fen warrior turned sharply and quickly crossed to Ezra's side.

Buck groaned and let himself fall back onto the soft grass, staring at the sky above.

"Great Mother give me strength and save me from sensitive spymasters and waspish women!"

Jeh-Di, leaning on one elbow beside the mustached soldier, looked thoughtfully after Mairè's receding figure. "Just remember this wasp has a big sting."

The man-at-arms rolled onto his stomach and landed a playful punch on the youth's arm.

"What's this? Even the pup's giving me advice now!"

"You'd do well to listen, son," rumbled Josiah, "Ezra and the Fen-woman have a strong bonding and while she is not pledged as she is to Chris, their association runs as deep as blood."

Buck sat up, suddenly interested and he noticed that Jeh-Di was leaning forward expectantly.

“Something we should know about, Josiah?”

The druid heaved a sigh and glanced briefly at the pair across the henge.

“It is not common knowledge but neither is it a secret, that the Ranger has a child by a Fen warrior, still a mere babe but now eight seasons old. He is one of the Chosen and as such is a part of the Fen people, for his blood now runs in their veins. They accept him as one of their own and he is permitted the freedom of the Fens, an honour permitted few men. He speaks their language, knows their ways and has proved himself worthy by siring a child on one of their greatest warriors.”

Buck snorted.

“Sounds more like a stallion at stud than a romantic liaison.”

Josiah raised an eyebrow and stared levelly at the grinning man-at-arms.

“Your sense of humour may yet be the death of you. Take my advice and heed Mairè’s warning, Buck, else you may find yourself without more than a tongue.”

Jeh-Di laughed, skittering rapidly out of the bigger man’s reach as he lunged for the young squire.

“That’s a pretty sharp knife she carries, Buck and I reckon she could have you singing like a choir boy in no time at all!”

Josiah turned to look thoughtfully at Mairè and Ezra.

“Don’t underestimate Ezra, Buck. I know a little of his past and I will tell you this, you can accept him and keep him as a loyal ally and friend or you can make of him a formidable enemy. But mark my words, be prepared to stand by your choice for there will be no second chance.”

Buck became suddenly serious, remembering his words to Jeh-Di after Ezra had demonstrated his exceptional prowess with the rapier. He slowly stood up, brushing the grass from his leggings aware of three sets of questioning eyes silently watching his every movement. He took a purposeful step forward before Jeh-Di’s hesitant voice broke into his thoughts.

“Buck...?”

“Don’t worry, kid. I have enemies enough.”

Standish looked up as the man-at-arms lowered himself to the ground a few feet away, to lean on one elbow as he stretched out in a relaxed attitude and plucked a stem of clover from among the grass. After a brief second of uncomfortable silence with the

Ranger and the warrior waiting expectantly, Buck plunged straight into what he wanted to say.

“Mairè said I don’t think before I open my mouth.” He paused and chewed thoughtfully on the stem. “She’s right.”

A fleeting smile crossed the Ranger’s lips at the ready admission from the soldier and he cast a sidelong glance at the Fen woman.

“Did she by any chance tell you that she’d cut out your tongue?” he ventured, not bothering to hide his amusement at Buck’s obvious discomfiture.

The soldier coughed and reddened, nervously eyeing the blond warrior at the other man’s side.

“She might have mentioned something along those lines.”

“I thought so.”

“Blood and Thunder, Ezra, that’s not the only reason I wanted to apologise!” he blustered hastily.

The Ranger’s grin broadened and he waved a dismissive hand in the man-at-arms’ direction.

“It’s one of the best reasons I can think of.”

Buck laughed, abashed, and deliberately avoided looking at the woman’s disapproving frown as she sent twin spears of green ice in his direction, obviously not as easily mollified as Ezra.

“Well said, Ranger.” He hesitated. “Whatever the reason, I want to say I’m sorry for what I said, and you’re right, I’ve spent more time than was good for me with my backside on a wooden pew.”

It was Ezra’s turn to look uncomfortable.

“That remark was uncalled for and not worthy of me. In fact, I think I have some apologising of my own to do.”

Buck suddenly thrust out his hand.

“Then shall we call it even. These are unusual times in which we find ourselves and circumstance oft-times makes strange bedfellows. Let there be no rift between us.”

Standish responded, eschewing the more traditional open hand-shake to clasp Buck’s hand in a soldier’s grip; closed fists and linked thumbs.

“As you say. We will like have need of each other before this day is through and we already have enemies to spare.”

Buck followed his gaze across the plain and felt a surge of apprehension as he realised how close the enemy had come in just a few short hours. Suddenly the ward the druid had placed around them seemed tenuous and insubstantial, and he felt the first stirrings of doubt that the small band could succeed in diverting the rolling tide of the Ragnathan army any more than they could reverse the flow of the ocean.

“Time is running out.” He spoke softly, his thoughts turning to the knight and the mercenary whose bodies lay on altar, neither completely living nor completely dead but instead suspended between two planes of existence. Two men, who would tempt the fates and, still living, walk among the dead.

Ezra slowly got to his feet, his eyes fixed on the undulating mass of humanity streaming across the plain growing ever more distinct, drawing ever closer even as they watched.

“No, Buck. For us time has already run out and here we wait to meet our destiny.”

Mairè suddenly vaulted to her feet and strode to the very limit of the standing stones, barred from stepping outside the circle by Josiah’s warding magic.

“He speaks the truth. Look!”

In the near distance a ripple seemed to rend the very fabric of the earth and a shape took form, indistinct at first then growing in clarity with each passing second until the mirage became real, a thing of substance, and a score of horsemen materialised where there had been nothing but open grassland.

Ezra’s eyes narrowed as he took in the red and black livery, the device of the rampant black bull on the waving pennons and the magnificent matched bays on which they were mounted.

“The King’s Legion.”

Buck looked keenly at the Ranger. “Gris’ elite guard?”

Mairè spat. “Butchers more like! Gris’ personal killers.”

Standish turned away as if the charging horsemen were of no consequence and began to walk back towards the druid sat with the remains of their small troop.

“As we may soon find out if Josiah’s illusion should fail to hold them.”

“You have doubts then?”

Ezra looked back over his shoulder at the man-at-arms, permitting himself the briefest of smiles.

“Always. Like Vin I trust in my own ability and three feet of steel to face my enemies, not the wiles of a magician.”

The Fen woman was frowning, touching her hand to the shimmering barrier in front of her.

“Wait! There is something different. Something has changed. Don’t you feel it?”

Buck moved to stand beside her and studied the wavering barrier before them.

“You mean apart from the fact that we are but six against an army?”

“No!” she snapped impatiently, “See the ward? It weakens.”

At that moment a bolt of lightning split the skies and a blue flash of energy surged around the standing stones, a sizzling conduit of natural power that crackled and spat, throwing Mairè and Buck to the ground. Unhurt, and rallying quickly to gain their feet the two watched in dismay as the only protection they had save their own wits, dissolved in a haze of ozone-rich smoke.

Josiah’s voice rang out across the circle, his words boding nothing but ill for the companions.

“To arms! The circle is breached!”

Almost as one the six instinctively drew back to protect the altar stone.

“Josiah! Isn’t there anything you can do?” Buck took up position between Jeh-Di and the priest, his war sword a natural extension of his arm as he waited to meet the first of what was likely to be many waves of attackers.

“There is no time, Buck. There is nothing for it but to stand and fight.”

Buck looked hastily around at the group. An untried youth, a priest and a healer; with all the willingness in the world they were not soldiers.

“What if we give you some time, priest?”

The druid looked shrewdly at the mustached man-at-arms.

“How much time?”

Buck quickly glanced from Ezra to Mairè.

“Are you both with me? Will you give these barbarians something to think about or shall we wait to be slaughtered like sheep?”

Mairè drew herself up and flexed her sword arm.

“You already know what I think.”

The Ranger smiled briefly.

“I’m with you, Buck.” He looked evenly at Josiah. “If we can delay but a third of a candlemark would that be of help?”

Josiah nodded, his weariness obvious.

“There is a chance that I could shift us from this place, but you must all be back here once I am ready.”

Ezra turned to the other two warriors, speaking rapidly, assuming command like one born to it.

“We harry and disengage. If one of us falls then so be it, the others must leave. We cannot afford a stand up fight and we cannot afford heroic gestures. At my signal, if I am able, we return.” He turned back to Josiah. “If we are...in any way delayed, you do what you must to save the others.”

Jeh-Di sprang forward.

“You need as many swords as you can get. Let me ride with you.”

Buck shook his head already starting to walk away.

“Not this time. Ezra, Mairè and me have done this before. It’s no job for a first-timer. You hold fast here and see that Chris and Vin are not sacrificed.” He squeezed the young man’s shoulder. “Don’t be too keen to die, son. You’ll have your chance yet.”

Disappointed, the dark-haired squire nodded and stepped back as the trio quickly captured their horses, their mounts already into a gallop before any of them were fully in the saddle.

The Ranger leaned towards the Fen warrior as they rode.

“Seven to one,” he grinned, “Just our kind of odds.”

She gave a half-smile and turned to Buck on her right.

“The King’s Legion are armed with cross bows, Buck. Under and over. So take care when we get within striking distance. Keep moving, and get in close as fast as you can.”

Buck nodded, for once not ready with a glib reply. “Anything else I should know?”

Ezra dropped back to come up on Buck’s right. “Just one thing. Don’t be taken alive.”

Josiah wheeled before the three warriors were even out of sight and looked first to the two still forms lying on the altar before grabbing Jeh-Di by the arm.

“Remember the waypath that lies beyond? Fetch me some hawthorn and yew from the grove; as much as you can cut and carry but be quick.” He grabbed Nathan’s sleeve. “You and I must create a portal here.”

The apothecary looked surprised. “Me? What do I know about magic, Josiah? I’m a healer.”

“Just do as I tell you, but fast, again we have no time to waste. Take my staff and describe a circle around the altar stone, leaving enough room for us all to be contained

within its boundaries, then find me some pennyroyal and nettle.” He smiled and pointed reassuringly to the meadow in response to the healer’s doubtful expression. “They can be found but a stone’s throw from here, Nathan.”

The moor accepted the druid’s staff and, given his task, started to move away but his eye wandered to the plain and for a moment he could do nothing but watch, transfixed, as the three riders diverged, each taking a different direction as they charged to meet the Legion of Gris.

“They are doomed.”

Josiah frowned and followed Nathan’s gaze, his own expression wistful.

“It’s a valiant thing that they do. Logic tells me they cannot prevail but my heart tells me otherwise.” He drew a deep breath and slapped the healer on the arm. “Yet it will all be for nothing unless we do our part. Now haste! There is work to be done.”

He had lost sight of the others in the commotion but he knew that at least they had struck the first blow, successfully splintering the orderly ranks of the Legion into a less cohesive melee through which the three determined warriors had managed to wreak havoc. Sword arm, rising, falling and thrusting with monotonous regularity, the man-at-arms again and again hacked and slashed a path through the densely packed cavalry. Already bleeding from a half-dozen sword nicks, Buck sought the Ranger, his blood lust rapidly cooling as the first rush of battle waned. Sheer bravado had given them the minutest of advantages. That three lone horsemen would ride headlong into the King’s Legion, smashing bodily into the ranks of cavalry was a tactic shocking enough to give them the few short minutes to savagely rend the men and horses before the elite guard had time to regroup. That brief moment of was over and now he was fighting against all odds just to stay alive.

He caught a glimpse of blond hair as Mairè, standing in the stirrups, clove through a Legionnaire’s neck, the mighty claymore almost severing the man’s head as her battle cry rang chillingly across the plain before she was gone, then a moment later a fleeting image of a grim-faced Ezra on the defensive against a larger opponent before again being lost in the sea of faces. Wrenching his mount’s head around he broke free of the mass of horsemen, intent on circling to back up the Ranger before he was overcome by weight of numbers that no amount of skill could possibly match.

His cry was lost, swallowed in the noise of battle, a roar of agony as a bolt from a Legionnaire’s crossbow sank deep into his thigh, just above his knee. Dragging on the

reins he pulled his horse onto its haunches, as he savagely changed direction and kicked the beast into a charge, his sword cutting a swathe through the centre of the fray as he struggled to join forces with the embattled Ranger.

“Ezra! Time to leave!”

Standish, as if in reply, rose in his stirrups and delivered a brutally efficient blow that left a shocked guardsman staring at a bloody stump where his hand had been neatly severed at the wrist. Meeting Buck's eyes he grinned ferally, green eyes alive with the lust for blood and with a half-salute, neatly disengaged from the fight and spurred his horse into clear air.

“Mairè!” The charger danced excitedly as Ezra wheeled the big warhorse around. “Disengage!”

The Fen warrior made an ululating trill in her throat that signalled her acknowledgement and with a final twist of her blade she completed the disembowelment of a screaming Legionnaire and turned her horse to follow.

The three bloodied warriors did not so much retreat as take headlong flight across the plain, merging to ride abreast as the remaining Legionnaire's gave chase.

“Long enough, d'you think?” yelled Buck, thinking how far away the standing stones suddenly seemed to be.

Ezra whipped his horse to greater speed, sparing a brief glance over his shoulder at their pursuers. “Long enough for me!”

Buck's mind registered the plain and simple fact that he was rushing to meet the earth before he made the most basic connection that his horse was crashing nose first to the ground, literally shot out from under him by a well placed bolt from a Legionnaire's crossbow. With barely enough time to kick out of the stirrups he rolled free of the wildly thrashing animal, trying to avoid the flaying hooves and at the same time suck air into lungs that had been forcefully emptied on his abrupt impact with the ground. He clawed at the grass, momentarily disorientated and feeling a new explosion of pain above his knee as the still protruding shaft of the crossbow bolt struck the unyielding surface. Hells and Demons! Rolling onto his back he clutched at his leg, feeling warm blood flowing over his fingers as he tried to grasp the firmly embedded bolt.

The thunder of approaching hooves lent an urgency to his already frantic efforts and with a ragged sob he steeled himself, pulling the missile free and casting it hastily aside as he reached for his belt knife, ignoring the flow of bright blood now running freely from the deep puncture. By the Great Mother, if he was about to die, let it be with some

dignity. He struggled to his feet as a lone horseman circled behind him, and spun into a defensive half-crouch using his sound leg as a pivot, ready and willing to meet the threat.

The Ranger.

Wordlessly, Standish reined in the big warhorse and leaning down, extended his arm. Unhesitatingly, Buck reached up gripped Ezra's forearm, grateful for the man's strength that hauled him bodily into the saddle, his own contribution less than he would have liked to admit as he swung up behind the younger man. The gelding leapt forward at Ezra's urging and Buck was forced to take firm hold of his rescuer or risk being unseated, knowing that there would be no second chances if either one of them should now be unhorsed.

"No heroics, remember? If one falls, the others go on!" He yelled, his voice mocking. "Was not that the agreement?"

"I surprise myself on occasion, sir," replied the Ranger, grimly, "Moreover I grant that oft times the truth and I have little more than a passing acquaintance. Besides which we cannot afford to lose a sword arm -- even yours!"

"Whatever your reasons, my thanks, Ezra."

"Save your thanks, Buck. You may yet have cause to curse me -- and I, you -- unless we can outrun these pox-ridden bastards."

Indeed the delay had cost them dearly and the distance between the doubly burdened steed and the, albeit reduced, band of legionnaires following had been severely abridged. In spite of the danger, Buck laughed as the powerful gelding responded to the urgent demands of its rider and strained to gain more speed.

"Ah, Ezra! But that was a fight! A few more swords and we would have dealt them a mortal blow!"

"No doubt," agreed the Ranger, "But what were your plans for the remaining ten thousand?"

The man-at-arms threw back his head and roared with laughter. Death may well be on his trail, indeed plucking at his clothes, but for now he was alive -- and at that very moment that was all that mattered.

The Breton put out a hand to stop the Galalan at his side and once again tried to get his bearings in the huge cavern.

"Are you certain this is the way?"

Vin sighed and thrust out a hip, resting his hand on his sword hilt.

“Chris. See that door yonder? The one through which you could drive a brigade of soldiers line abreast? That is our goal as it was five minutes ago, as it still is.”

L'Arabee looked evenly at the mercenary, then his face softened and dissolved into a smile as he shook his head.

“Forgive me, Vin. Something about this place addles my brain. It does not seem fitting that we should be here, yet here we are. I feel somehow,” he searched for the word, “displaced.”

Vin nodded.

“Can't say that I don't know what you mean, Chris. Feel as if I'm not quite in one place or the other myself.”

The knight looked around at the seemingly limitless vault wondering if truly the place had no beginning and no end, then with a squaring of his shoulders he faced again in the direction they would take.

“Come. Let's make an end to this. I would know what awaits us behind this door.”

The Galalan shivered, every hair on his body stirring as he recalled his previous attempt to cross the threshold.

“I know it is something ancient, and very powerful and I know it does not want us here,” he said, quietly but with such conviction that Chris felt his own hackles rise. “It would not let me pass, and such pain I never wish to feel again.”

For a moment he stared at the door not ten furlongs from where they now stood, with eyes unfocused, as a host of other memories crowded into his mind's eye, clamouring for attention, showing him not only that which he feared to remember but that he had never known.

“Vin?”

The Breton's voice called him back and with a brief shake of his head he dismissed the images, before pressing ahead once more.

“We are wasting time, Chris, and I feel it in my very blood that there is little time left to us.”

Chris thought of those they had left behind at the henge and offered up a prayer that the mercenary was wrong. Boot-heels ringing out, step matching step, the two soldiers marched resolutely towards their goal.

Josiah walked once more around the altar and sprinkled the last of the clover around the stone. It was a poor effort but the druid was sure that it would be enough for his purposes. In miniature, he had recreated the grove of the waypath not a mile distant using the granite slab as its touch stone. That the circle was on the same ley line as the grove was a fact; whether he could draw on its power to make a shift in dimensions was at best an experiment and by the time he knew whether or not he had been correct in his calculations they would either be safe or they would be butchered where they stood. He looked at the two pale, waxen soldiers lying side by side in a parody of death, their chests barely rising and sadly wondered what would become of them if he failed. Two shades doomed to wander the Halls of the Dead, never at rest, never finding peace; all they would have would be each other for all eternity.

“They come!”

Jeh-Di’s voice rang clearly across the henge and at the warning Nathan quickly gathered the last of the items he had collected from the horses and placed them within the circle. Josiah nodded in approval and picked up his staff.

“Jeh-Di, come and take your place now,” he instructed, “We must be ready.”

The youth nodded and reluctantly tore himself away from his vantage point, his blood singing in his veins at the skirmish he had just witnessed. Ai! Mairè was indeed a warrior. Wide eyed he had watched as she had decapitated a man with a single blow of her claymore and swung the head, streaming blood, into the air by its long hair and shrieked a war cry that had stirred his battle lust before sending the bloody missile back into the ranks of cavalry. His heart had been in his mouth as Buck and the Ranger had plunged headlong into the front ranks scattering men and horses, sword arms hacking and slashing, now to the left, now to the right as they drove into the very heart of the Legion.

At that moment Mairè, hair streaming, green eyes alive with the thrill of battle, charged into the ring of stones and executed a flying dismount, hitting the ground at a run and slapping her horse into action driving it away from the hastily constructed bower. Out of breath, bleeding from arm and thigh she ran to stand by Josiah, quickly entering the protective circle.

“Buck? Ezra?” He asked quickly.

“The man-at-arms fell,” she panted grimly, “Ezra went back.”

Jeh-Di started forward but the Fen warrior’s fingers gripped his jerkin, pulling him back.

“No! They will come or they will die.” She turned quickly to the druid. “Ezra was firm on this. Do not wait too long else we all be doomed. It was always a risk.”

Jeh-Di wheeled to look at the tree-priest, his eyes hard. “You would leave them?”

Josiah lifted his staff. “Mairè is right, it is Vin and Chris we must look to now.”

“But they fought for us.”

Mairè tilted her head, not understanding the sentiment.

“That is a soldier’s lot, Jeh-Di. There is always a risk and Ezra chose to go back rather than save himself. It is a noble thing that he did -- but foolish.”

“That should at least count for something!” protested the squire, “Wait a little longer, Josiah.”

The druid shook his head.

“I cannot wait if we are to have any hope of success.” He looked away from his former apprentice’s accusing eyes. “I cannot.”

Josiah struck his staff once on the ground and once on the altar stone before walking slowly around the circle drawn on the ground, tapping the earth at intervals as he uttered a single word. The air began to hum and crackle with a tension that the three within the circle felt as a tingling that began in their fingertips and crawled along their scalps. Mairè drew Jeh-Di closer to her, one arm still streaming blood, around his shoulders. The squire turned to look at her, his face an open book.

“Do not grieve. This is not the way of a warrior.” But her own green eyes were sombre as she stared into the distance.

Ezra’s war horse burst through the uprights, foam flying from its open mouth, its black coat rimed with sweat as it thundered to a halt that drove it to its haunches. The man-at-arms slid over its rump and dropped to the ground, falling to one knee as his injured leg failed to support him. Ezra landed beside him, slapping the horse’s rump to send it flying back towards their pursuers before roughly manhandling the bigger man to his feet.

“Buck!”

Slipping from under the Fen woman’s arm, the squire darted forward to lend his support to the grinning soldier.

“Quickly now,” urged Mairè, bodily dragging each of the men in turn into the circle, briskly admonishing them as she gathered them to her: “Fools!”

With a blood curdling battle cry, the Legion poured between the standing stones, their quarry at last within reach.

“Now or never,” urged Ezra softly, and found he was squeezing Mairè’s hand as the first horseman loosed his deadly missile.

Jeh-Di had travelled the waypaths with Josiah before but this was not like anything he had ever experienced. The paths that the druid wove between space and time were dark and quiet avenues through which he had often been transported albeit with a vague sense of unease. This was a frightening parody of the priest’s paths, weaving as he hurtled through space without having seemed to change position and his stomach roiled with the unpleasant sensation that he was on a rolling sea yet his body told him that he did not move. His ears rang with voices that he could not understand and a rushing wind that almost deafened him, but most frightening of all was the fact that he could no longer see any of the others. He was alone, isolated in a darkness that oozed menace, and although he clutched at the hilt of his sword, he knew it was false courage and in truth he was more frightened than he could ever remember.

The end came so rapidly and unexpectedly that Jeh-Di was thrown violently forward, falling awkwardly to land on his elbow, cursing as lightning bolts of pain shot through his arm and made his eyes water with the pain of it. Vainly clutching at the throbbing joint he became aware, through misting eyes, that it had become light again. After the solid darkness, the bright intensity of the light was a shock and he squinted in defence as his pupils contracted painfully at the assault. Blurred shapes moved within the field of his vision and he felt the icy fingers of fear crawl across his scalp. Gods and thunder, where had Josiah landed him?

“Jeh-Di?”

The squire shook his head and blinked.

“Josiah?” He managed to focus on the druid and on seeing the familiar robes, his heart resumed a more regular rhythm and ceased its frantic attempts to burst out of his chest.

“Are you all right?”

Jeh-Di struggled to his knees, still blinking.

“What happened?” He gasped, still rubbing his elbow, “I lost everyone. Are they all here?”

He felt the strong hand of Josiah grip his arm and help him to his feet.

“We are safe...for the moment.”

Jeh-Di looked around, suddenly aware that they stood in the midst of a vast echoing chamber surrounded by ancient, mouldering walls that reeked of moist earth and -- death. His eyes widened as he directed his gaze at the druid.

“Where in all hells are we?”

“My dear boy,” the voice was Ezra’s, a hint of amusement running through his words, “You may be a fraction closer to the truth than you could possibly imagine. Your friend, the priest, has snatched us from the very jaws of death to bring us to a most fitting haven. This amazing edifice has many names: Necropoli, City of the Fallen, Valhalla but I fear it may be better known to you as the Halls of the Dead.”

The Ranger was resting easily against one of the vaults, smiling as if he found the whole affair to be a huge source of entertainment. Jeh-Di looked quickly from one to the other of the party. Buck, ashen-faced, being tended by Nathan; Mairè, standing aside from the others with one hand on her belt knife looking at ill-at-ease; Josiah leaning against a tomb as he slowly stroked his chin, deep in thought. Just the six of them here in this place where no living man should set foot.

“Vin and Chris?”

Ezra waved a dismissive hand in the priest’s direction.

“Ask your tree-worshipping friend.”

“Josiah?”

The big man raised his head and looked at the younger man. “This is something I cannot say for certain, Jeh-Di.”

The squire looked aghast at his former mentor.

“We’ve lost them?”

Josiah lowered his head.

“I must have some time to ponder this, Jeh-Di. There are influential forces at work here that I have not yet been able to analyse. Now leave me.” The druid’s voice became brusque. “I have no time for idle chatter.”

Ezra rested irreverently against one of the vaults and wearily struggled with the buckles of his armour. His side burned and he realised that at some time during the skirmish with the King’s Legion, a blade had found its mark but until now he had been unaware of it. With care he eased up the hem of his undershirt, sucking in his breath as the linen, glued with drying blood, stuck to the wound in his side.

“Ezra?”

He glanced up and casually let the shirt fall back into place.

“Mairè.”

She dropped one knee to the ground and without hesitation inspected the wound.

“Why did you not say you were hurt?”

“It’s a scratch, nothing more.”

The Fen warrior promptly explored the extent of the sword cut with her fingers, frowning as Ezra bit back a yelp and started to squirm uncomfortably under her relentless attention.

“Well, it’s true you will not die from it,” she announced, finally, “a deep flesh wound nonetheless and it needs attention.”

“It can wait.”

She smiled then and sat down beside him, favouring her left leg that had been scored by a blade and which, Ezra noted, also needed attention.

“You went back,” she said softly, placing a hand on his arm. “It was a foolish risk.”

“A calculated risk,” countered the Ranger smoothly, “Buck is too good a swordsman to lose so needlessly.”

Mairè looked doubtful.

“You went back even though you were yourself wounded. You followed your heart and not your head.”

Without replying or even acknowledging that she had spoken, Ezra pushed himself to his feet, bending stiffly to pick up his discarded studded leather armour, deliberately not meeting Mairè’s gaze as he focused on examining his injured side.

“You’re right. Nathan really should take a look at this.”

Quickly turning his back on the woman, he walked to where the healer was dressing the man-at-arms’ wound and sat down to wait his turn.

The two men sat side by side -- the paladin and the mercenary -- backs to the wall as they contemplated not only the massive doors before them but the shimmering arc of energy that rippled in pulsing waves to shield the portal. Chris had already felt its bite and even now flexed his sword hand which still tingled from the jolt of power that had surged through his arm and, he felt sure, would have stopped his heart if Vin, seeing the danger, had not pulled him to safety. Rubbing gently at his forearm, he fastened his gaze on the closed doors.

“This is where we must go. There is no other way. But how?”

Vin tugged distractedly at the bindings on his armour.

"I hoped you would tell me."

"There has to be a way," insisted the knight, "else why would we be here?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me that too."

Both men grinned then Chris stood up again and walked to and fro in front of the doors.

"There's something we're not seeing, Vin. Something right here in front of us."

Vin looked again at the solid bulk of the doorway.

"There's no way back, Chris, so unless we go forward we're doomed to spend the rest of eternity right here."

Frustrated, Chris drew his sword, the steel ringing as he freed it from its sheath and reversing his grip threw it with as much force as he could muster at the object of his annoyance.

"A pox on that! I *will* find a way!"

The heavy sword thudded into the wood and a keening wail that rose quickly to an ear-splitting crescendo filled the chamber, forcing both Chris and the mercenary to cover their ears in an attempt to escape the deafening shriek.

"Well, Chris, you did something..." yelled Vin, barely able to make himself heard over the intensity of the noise.

The Breton shook his head, his eardrums feeling as if they would burst under the auditory assault.

"So it seems! But was it the right thi...?"

Chris words were abruptly cut off as he suddenly stumbled forward, losing his footing and landing spread-eagled on the floor as if thrust from behind by a mighty force, a cry escaping his lips as he writhed in agony on the flagstones. His body seemed to expand within its skin and his very bones cracked and stretched as if trying to give birth to some unholy monster within himself. Drawing himself up to his knees and battling the knotting cramps of his muscles he rested on all fours, retching and heaving, all the while searching for the mercenary and trying to call his name. As tears of pain streamed down his face he could manage nothing more than to hang his head, shocked and afraid at the rapidly expanding pool of crimson forming in front of him as rivers of blood ran unchecked from nose, ears and mouth. Summoning the last of his strength to overcome the near-paralysis that had gripped his body, denying him movement, he threw back his head and howled, a sound of pure anguish dredged from the depths of his soul. In the space of a heartbeat there was silence and as the last echoes of his cry died, the Breton

slumped to the floor, insensible, in the final throes of his agony reaching out to the already unconscious Galalan beside him. Fingertips touching the two soldiers lay side by side, the tie that still bound them as one still unbroken.

Nathan spared a brief glance for the Ranger as he sat down next to Buck, noticing the awkward stiffness of his movements.

“Just a social call, Ezra?” asked Nathan, with a meaningful tilt of the eyebrow.

Standish flashed a tired smile, aware that the healer already suspected he was carrying an injury.

“I would wish that I sought nothing more than your august company, Nathan, however as much as I am loath to confess it, I find myself in need of your particular talents.”

The man-at-arms cursed roundly in a sudden outburst as the healer tightly bound the wound in his leg, then frowned at the Ranger,

“So, you did not escape unscathed after all.”

“Unfortunately,” admitted Ezra, “one of the bastards did succeed in drawing blood. A mere scratch, I assure you.”

Nathan snorted a derisive laugh.

“I’ll warrant a ‘mere scratch’ would not see you here enlisting my aid.”

Ezra sighed and lay down on the hard floor, one hand lightly pressed to his side.

“I hardly expected to be in any condition to worry about such trivia as a wound. Convinced as I was that we were about to meet our deaths at the henge.”

Buck flexed his leg as Nathan finished bandaging and grimaced, then nodded in appreciation before switching his attention back to the Ranger.

“Aye, Josiah did well, although I believe he may have surprised even himself with this latest piece of chicanery.”

The healer moved his pack to Standish’s side and opened the man’s doublet, eliciting a deep-throated growl from him as he peeled back the bloodied undershirt.

“Gods, Ezra! They say where there’s no sense there’s no feeling! You’ve been spitted by a broadsword by the looks of this.”

Buck leaned over the supine Ranger, his curiosity piqued.

“Nasty,” he agreed, then looked evenly at the pale face, which only now was starting to register pain and shock, suddenly realising what it must have cost the man to haul him up into the saddle as he had with such a rent in his side.

“Josiah...” Ezra gasped as Nathan went to work, “Josiah would seem to have misplaced two of our party in transit.”

Buck’s frown deepened and he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Aye. We may be safe from the King’s Legion but how came we to be in the Halls of the Dead? Chris and Vin were transported here by some strange magic that left their bodies at the henge, yet we come here entire. Body and soul intact.”

Ezra sucked in a deep breath.

“*Enfir tirer!* Speak for yourself, Buck.”

The man-at-arms offered his hand for the Ranger to grip as he silently bore the pain of the healer cleaning and stitching the deep gash the blade had opened under his ribs, thinking how many times he had done the same for Chris. He watched the man as Nathan drew the edges of the wound together with taut stitches and thought how much like Chris the Ranger was in many ways. Hell, there were as many differences as likenesses but the man-at-arms would have wagered his best horse that Ezra had, at some stage, been a knight.

“I don’t mind telling you, Ezra. I’m not sure if I like being here.”

Standish tensed as the bone needle once again entered his flesh, the muscles in his neck clearly defined as he stiffened, holding his breath.

“Believe me,” panted the Ranger after a moment, “You really would not have liked to stay on the plain with the Legion. Whatever hell has to offer, it can be no worse than what Gris’ men would have done to us.”

“But what about Chris and Vin? What if they’re lost?”

Ezra stared evenly at the man-at-arms for a moment, a shadow of what might have been sadness briefly clouding his brilliant green eyes.

“Then, my friend,” he said quietly, “There is nothing we can do for them. And maybe nothing we can do for ourselves either.”

He increased the pressure of his grip but it was not a sign of pain, rather a gesture of unity and understanding. Both men looked up as Mairè quietly joined them, kneeling in spite of her own wound, and carefully raising the Ranger’s head and shoulders onto her lap.

“Forgive me, Wind Walker,” she said simply, “I spoke out of turn earlier. Let nothing so senseless come between us, my brother.”

Ezra reached up and took one of her hands, his fingers deftly, if a little slowly, moving over hers in the secret signing of the Fens as he smiled wearily and closed his eyes.

Observing the interaction, Buck was again struck by the woman's loveliness although he knew she would not thank him for thinking her beautiful, and he wondered briefly if anything had ever passed between the Ranger and the warrior. That she had bedded Chris was no secret; might she not also have added the green-eyed, silver-tongued Standish to her conquests.

The healer tied off the last of the stitches in Ezra's side and smeared a daub of ointment across the wound before taking a small flask from his pack and decanting a measure of dark, viscous liquid into a small bone vessel barely bigger than a thimble.

"Drink this."

The Ranger looked dubiously at the offering, accepting it from the Moor in spite of his misgivings, trusting in the healer but hesitating, until Nathan quickly gestured for him to take it. So prompted, Ezra downed the concoction in one rapid swallow, first shuddering then coughing and making a gagging sound in his throat.

"Ye Gods and little fishes, Nathan, whatever that was for, I suggest you put it back in the horse that it came from!"

Buck laughed richly as the healer stoppered the flask and tucked it away in his pack, ignoring the Ranger's complaint as he turned his attention to Mairè.

"Your leg needs some attention?" The Moor did not presume to treat the warrior unless he first had her permission. He valued his skin.

The blond woman remained with Ezra's head in her lap, her long-fingered hands resting on the Ranger's shoulders, but extended her injured leg for Nathan to tend.

"It is but skin-deep, I was not quick enough to withdraw when one *cythraul* lost his blade."

The apothecary nodded and bent to inspect the lengthy but shallow gash as Ezra gave a short bark of a laugh.

"Hah! Probably lost his hand too from what I saw of your work."

Mairè dug a thumb into his shoulder until he writhed to escape her grip although the smile did not leave his face.

"Of course," she replied seriously, "So watch yourself Ranger else you suffer a similar fate."

Standish raised a hand to playfully capture hers. "Now, Woman, surely even you would not take advantage of a wounded man?"

The Fen woman gave one of her rare smiles and leaned over him, her face so close to his that Buck thought she would kiss him but Mairè merely locked her eyes with his then started to laugh.

“Watch me, *cariadon*.”

Josiah, grey with fatigue, watched the three warriors being tended by Nathan and spared a moment to give thanks to the Goddess that they had, against all odds, prevailed and had thankfully suffered but relatively minor wounds in the engagement. He owed a debt to the trio for giving him the time he needed to work his sorcery but he had so far repaid them by bringing them to this dreaded realm reserved for the dead. Not a fitting place for the likes of them. At least not yet. Their time would come and probably sooner than any of them would wish but for now they deserved every moment of life granted to them.

A few feet away, Jeh-Di sat with his hands clasped around his knees, looking into the distance. Not belonging. He no longer wanted to be aligned with the priest and, being but a lowly squire, he did not yet have leave to align himself with the warriors. Josiah shook his head sadly. A difficult time for the lad to be sure as he tried to find his place in the greater scheme of things. Buck, from the look in his eye, had his mind elsewhere and it was far from mentoring the dark-eyed youth that had spent so long under the druid's watchful tuition.

With a sigh he picked up his staff and walked slowly away from them all. He needed time to think. The shifting spell had gone awry and brought them to the place he had never thought to enter as a living man. He knew not how they had come here, but worse, he knew not how they could ever return. With a heavy tread he leaned wearily on his staff and did not look back as his sandalled feet slapped softly on the stone flags underfoot.

The mournful howl that echoed through the chamber stopped him in his tracks. Man or beast he could not say, but the absolute certainty that they were most definitely not alone in this place, spurred him to action. In spite of his wound, Ezra was first to catch up with the druid, buckling his armour as he jogged easily towards the older man, his companions not too far behind.

“Be kind enough to reassure me, priest, and tell me that was at least human.”

“Would that I could be certain, Ranger,” responded the priest, with all honesty, “But I'll warrant we will find out soon enough.”

"I was afraid you'd say that, druid," confessed Ezra, dryly, as he shrugged to adjust the set of his breastplate and turned to face the remaining four of the company, "Suggestions anyone?"

Mairè looked at the group with mild curiosity.

"Suggestions? We have but two alternatives: we are the hunters or we are the hunted." She drew her claymore from the sheath at her back, its steel singing as it left the scabbard. "And I am a hunter!"

Buck grinned broadly. "I'm with her."

Josiah nodded sagely.

"We should at least make some effort to find out what lies ahead for I fear we cannot return the way we came."

"Then," announced Ezra, quickly, "it seems the decision is made. Jeh-Di? Nathan? What say you?"

"Doesn't seem right to just sit and wait," offered Jeh-Di, a little hesitantly, "especially when there's ...something...out there."

The Ranger smiled and squeezed the youth's shoulder, nodding his approval and eliciting a flush of shy pride from the squire in being recognised for his contribution. Nathan merely shrugged.

"Where you go I'll follow. I'm a healer not a hero."

The man-at-arms lightly punched the apothecary on the arm.

"Each has his place, Nathan. I for one am glad to have you along, be you follower or leader."

"Aye," agreed Josiah, "I believe we will all have need of each other to see this through. Now if we are all agreed, let us make haste and see just what fate has in store for us."

The band moved forward, Ezra taking the lead with a surprised Jeh-Di, at the Ranger's bidding, alongside him, closely followed by Buck and Mairè with the two mages bringing up the rear. Whatever waited ahead, they would meet it as one.

Jeh-Di had not spent much time in company with the Ranger since his humiliation at the hands of the master swordsman in the tavern courtyard. The enigmatic Standish had been sufficiently aloof for the squire to avoid him, suspecting that the Ranger was forever ready to have a joke at his expense, and half-afraid that to try and befriend him would only invite ridicule. Now with Chris, he mused, he knew exactly where he stood; the knight simply ignored his existence most of the time and when he did notice his

presence it was usually to criticise him. Vin on the other hand had been helpful enough, showing him the way to throw an axe and Buck had taken him under his wing but Jeh-Di knew that neither the mercenary nor the man-at-arms yet took him seriously. He was tolerated by Mairè, conditionally accepted by Nathan and treated with benign affection by Josiah. None of which in any way served to bolster his confidence.

Ezra had succeeded in changing his uncertain status in an instant and now he walked in company with the Ranger at the head of the band. He pushed aside the fleeting thought that his position may have more to do with the fact that he was expendable than because Standish had any great faith in him and, accepting that he was the youngest and most inexperienced of them all, he understood that at some time he would be put to the test. At least with the Ranger beside him he might not make a total fool of himself. On the other hand...

The Ranger's arm suddenly shot out, holding him back and bringing the party to an abrupt halt, as the hiss of his sword leaving its sheath warned the others to be prepared.

"Something lies beyond."

Jeh-Di peered into the dim distance and looked askance at Ezra, seeing nothing out of place.

"It does?"

Standish looked quickly at the squire, his face revealing nothing, then signalled that they should hold position as he took a dozen more slow steps forward. Ignoring his instruction, Mairè detached herself from the group and followed, easily catching up with the Ranger.

"He is here, Wind Walker," she whispered fiercely, her face suddenly pale as she gripped his arm.

"Chris?"

"I know he is near, but his life force is weak and I fear for him." She struck her fist against her breast. "I feel it -- here."

Ezra knew better than to dispute the pledged warrior's instinct for her master, knowing the bond between them was strong enough for her claim to be true. He pointed ahead with his drawn rapier.

"There. What do you see?"

The Fen woman narrowed her eyes and concentrated, finally closing her eyes and slipping into a trance-like state.

"Aiy," she exclaimed softly, "It is my Lord."

“Are you certain?”

“He bleeds,” she said simply, “We must hurry.”

The Ranger nodded and waved the others forward.

“I believe we may have found our errant companions from whom we were lately separated, though whether living men or shades I would not care to surmise. In fact given our current circumstances I would strongly advise that we exercise caution.”

“But if it is Chris and Vin...” started Jeh-Di, stunned that Ezra seemed to be hesitating.

“Jeh-Di, I intend to take nothing in this place at face value. I for one am loathe to spend any time at all among spectres and ghosts, and certainly do not intend to invite a potential cuckoo into the nest.”

“I think by all that he means, let’s check them out first,” supplied Buck, slapping the squire on the back, “Don’t want any unpleasant surprises.”

The Ranger raised an eyebrow at the man-at-arms. “I believe that’s what I said.”

Jeh-Di looked doubtful. For some reason Standish always managed to make him feel as if he no longer understood the Common tongue.

“If you say so,” he muttered under his breath, and took a better grip on the unfamiliar sword in his hand as they started forward once again.

“Blood and thunder!” exclaimed the Ranger, quietly awestruck, as they approached the two figures lying still as death on the cold, stone floor, “Although it would seem there is a lot more of the blood than of the thunder.”

“Holy Mother, it’s like a charnal house,” observed Buck, as he pushed past Standish to kneel at his friend’s side and search for any sign of life.

“Was there a fight?” asked a hesitant Jeh-Di, not quite as willing as the others to walk through the blood that had pooled in several places on the floor.

Josiah grasped the mercenary’s flaccid shoulder and turned his unresisting body over, frowning at the gore that covered the Galalan’s face. Gently he turned the soldier’s head first to one side, then the other.

“This was no fight. See, he bleeds only from the ears, the nose and the mouth. It’s the same with Chris, yes?”

Buck checked and nodded, absently wiping the blood from his fingers on pants already stained from his own wound.

The Ranger moved forward and walked slowly and thoughtfully around the two prostrate soldiers, avoiding the bloodied flagstones without missing a step in his circumambulation.

“A question, priest. Is this the Chris and Vin you sent before us to this place, or are these merely their corporeal forms that vanished on our rude displacement from the henge? Or could there be other forces at work here of which we have no knowledge?”

Josiah suddenly laughed softly, shaking his grizzled head, unmindful of the fact that five pairs of eyes were fastened on him with a morbid fascination.

“I have been a fool,” he sighed, “but sometimes even a mage cannot see the wood for the forest.”

Ezra leaned on one of the crypts, folding his arms and wincing as he was abruptly reminded of his wound. “Would you care to share your...enlightenment with us, Josiah?”

“The answer to your question, Ezra, is both. I believe when I shifted us to the waypath that the force of the ethereal connection binding Chris and Vin’s souls to their bodies was so strong that it was enough to transmigrate all of us here as well. I would never have predicted that this could happen but it is likely that as the henge sits on a powerful ley line, that forces over which I have no control came into play. Instead of a shift to the next waypath portal, we were propelled here.” He gestured to the two men. “What you see here is the result of body and soul merging together; a most traumatic and likely painful union.”

“How can you be sure?” asked the man-at-arms quietly, “What if you’re wrong.”

Mairè, kneeling across from Buck, trying to wipe the blood from the knight’s face with a piece torn from the hem of her undershirt, looked up with a savage gleam in her eye.

“He is not wrong!”

Buck held up a hand as if warding off an attack. “Only asking. This is not the place to make mistakes.”

“The mistake if you ask me,” quipped the Ranger, “is that we are here at all.”

“Yet, we are,” said the druid, matter-of-factly, “and for better or worse we are now in this quest together. There is no going back that I know of, so we must go forward and hope to find a way to escape these halls -- together.”

“And if there is no escape, druid?”

“Then we die here -- together.”

Standish sighed, and pushed himself away from the crypt on which he had been resting. "Most comforting, Josiah. Now may I suggest that we do something more for our two intrepid travellers here, than stand over them and talk of death."

"I agree," said Nathan, "Josiah, is there some way to bring them out of this daze?"

The druid rubbed his chin.

"I may know of a way to hasten the awakening..." He paused. "But it will take me a little time to prepare."

Ezra laughed and started to walk away towards the massive portal set in the wall not twenty paces from where the two men had fallen. "Well, time seems to be one commodity which we have in plenty, so fear not about wasting it."

As the others set about moving Chris and Vin to a less blood-slicked and unsavoury spot, the Ranger stared with interest at the ornately carved doors that stretched upward further than even his keen eyesight could discern. With caution borne of experience he stepped closer, intrigued by what he recognised as Chris' sword buried deeply in the wood, and acknowledging the superior strength that would have been necessary to achieve such a feat.

"Is this the way we must go then?"

Ezra turned at the sound of the voice to find Jeh-Di beside him.

"Maybe so. I suspect there is some cunning device however that protects this portal, else Vin and Chris would have passed beyond already."

"They might not have had time. Maybe they were struck down before they could attempt to open it."

Standish held a hand out, palm up to indicate the great war sword stuck fast in the door.

"I hardly think Chris would have been skewering doors with his blade if it was merely a matter of knocking and walking through. Mark me, this is the act of a man at the end of his patience."

Jeh-Di reached up to grasp the sword only to have the Ranger quickly knock his hand away.

"Hold, Jeh-Di! I trust not anything that concerns this place. If you would live a long and healthy life you would do well to approach everything with caution."

"But how will we find out if this is the way if we are too afraid to try?"

Ezra raised an eyebrow. "Afraid, Jeh-Di? You think I'm afraid?"

The squire's mouth dropped open. He had heard that quiet tone before, just before Standish had made a fool of him and demonstrated his expertise with the rapier at his expense. He did not think he was ready for another lesson from the Ranger.

"I did not mean...no, just that I...we...Aw, hells, Ezra, no. You know that's not what I meant."

Standish ducked his head and smiled, slapping the younger man on the shoulder.

"Fortunately for you, I do know. Trust me in this. If there is a way, I will find it, but I don't think the straightforward approach will serve us in this instance. Let me think on this." He turned to look at the activity surrounding the knight and the mercenary. "There is time enough to ponder this without plunging into a course of action we may live to regret -- or not, as the case may be. Now go, help the others. It befits a knight in training to learn a little humility."

The Galalan could hear the gentle murmur of voices around him and a cold draught of air flowing over his skin suggested he was still alive, if being in this hell hole of Valhalla could be described as being alive, but he was afraid to open his eyes. So much had happened that he did not understand, and the voices that buzzed constantly in his head only served to confuse him. They were now an irritating chorus of discontent that he tried his best to ignore but it was impossible. Damn the priest for his magic! Seductive whispers that urged him to yield, urgent pleas urging him to fight. *Give up your sword, soldier. Rest now! Take up the fight, warrior. Do not fail!*

"No!"

His own voice startled him, torn unbidden from his throat, to echo hollowly in the vast hall as he came rudely awake and sprang into a fighting crouch, his left arm warding off any assailants, his right clasping his belt knife. Wild-eyed and breathing heavily, he slowly realised that he was surrounded not, as he thought, by enemies but by his trusted companions. He stumbled back, squeezing his eyes shut and allowing his weapon to clatter to the floor as he grasped his head with both hands, uttering a Galalan obscenity before again focusing on the individual faces around him.

"How is that you are here?" He shook his head. "Am I dreaming? Or am I mad!"

"It is no dream and you are not mad, Vin," answered the druid, bending to pick up the soldier's knife, "But I will grant that you have been sorely tested and cannot blame you for being a little dazed."

The mercenary looked quickly round the gathering, filled with growing panic as he

failed to find the one face he sought.

“Chris? Where is he? We were at the door...the noise.... I fell...”

Josiah grasped his elbow in a firm grip, afraid that the mercenary was about to lose his wits completely.

“Rest easy, Vin, do not vex yourself. Chris is here, you have merely made a more rapid recovery than the good knight.” He smiled. “Remember he has a few more years upon him than you, my son.”

The Galalan impatiently shrugged off Josiah’s hand and took several steps forward, following an urgent and instinctive need to see the Breton for himself. Mairè rose slowly and allowed him to take her place beside the still insensible paladin. The mercenary barely noticed her hand on his arm as she turned understanding eyes in his direction.

“Have no fear. He merely sleeps. I swear to you that this is truth.”

As he reached out to touch the blond knight, resting his hand on his shoulder, he knew that she was right. He swung his head to look at the others.

“I do not understand.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I am a simple soldier. Give me a sword and I will fight. This goes beyond anything I was ever prepared for.”

Mairè knelt beside him and covered the hand that touched Chris, with her own.

“Beyond anything any of us were prepared for, Mercenary, yet the dice have been cast and we must play the game as fortune dictates.”

“She is right,” offered the Ranger, “It matters little now how any of this came about, what matters is where we go from here. And whatever the rest of you think, I believe that we have come here for a purpose and our fates now lie in the hands of the gods.”

“Great Mother! Do you never stop talking, Ranger?” The voice was barely above a strained whisper but commanded attention as if it had been shouted on the battlefield, and all heads turned as one towards the Breton.

“My Lord!”

Chris gasped as the woman embraced him and then again as she hastily released him fearing she had done him harm.

“Ai, Mairè. Have a care. I feel as if I have been torn apart, only to have someone put those parts back together in a somewhat different order to that which my maker intended.”

Vin allowed himself a smile and finally released his grip on the knight’s shoulder.

“It seems we suffered a like experience then.”

“Not one I’d care to repeat,” grunted the Breton as he raised himself on one elbow to

look around him in mild confusion. “Now can someone please tell me what in thunder is going on here?”

Buck moved forward, his traditional place beside the knight he had ridden with for a decade or more now usurped by the mercenary and the Fen Warrior.

“Just thought you might need some help, Chris. So we decided to follow you.”

Christiaan looked at the man-at-arms, noting the wound in his leg then let his gaze roam keenly over the others.

“And did battle to get here by the look of it.”

“A small holding action only,” supplied Ezra, glibly, “admittedly against superior numbers but Josiah was able to pluck us from the very heart of danger to...” He paused and glanced around him before making a sweeping theatrical gesture with his arm. “...where you see us now.”

Mairè cast a disapproving look at the Ranger’s flippant explanation.

“The King’s Legion,” she said quietly, “an advance guard transported by some trickery to within striking distance of the standing stones. The ward Josiah placed around the henge was breached and we were left unprotected.”

“Someone knew of our designs? The Ragnathan’s deliberately sought you out?”

Josiah leaned on his staff.

“I’m almost sure of it, Chris. As I have told you, the Ragnathan’s have a Seer among their ranks. This gives them a power far beyond my meagre attempts at magic.”

“A Seer? Is that not just a foreteller of the future?” asked Jeh-Di, puzzled.

“That and more,” replied Ezra, rubbing his thumb thoughtfully along his bottom lip, “this is a shaman who can shape, even control, future events.”

“Indeed, Ezra is right but the Seer’s power comes from a dark alliance with Shaitan himself. The Seer becomes merely a conduit through which the unholy one and his minions work.”

“So, my friends,” warned the Ranger, lightly, “take out your faith in your gods and dust it off, we may yet have need of it.”

Chris levelled a cautionary glance at Standish before turning back to Josiah. “So how did you come to be here?”

“An accident I confess,” admitted the druid, candidly, “The only way we could escape the circle with the King’s Legion bearing down upon us and no ward to conceal us, was for me to try and shift us to the nearest waypath. But,” he sighed, “I failed to take into account the fact the henge lies on a ley line which vastly increased the power of the

equation. Given the strong bond between the two of you, your spirits and your corporeal selves, when we shifted we were drawn here by...you. Or rather your souls drew your bodies to this place. The rest of us were caught up in the same vortex.”

Vin shook his head. “We brought you here?”

“Like iron to a magnet,” confirmed the priest, “And the feeling you both describe as being torn apart was the result of your bodily and spiritual selves reuniting.”

Chris sat up and rubbed his chest. “From where I stood, priest, it was more like trying to squeeze a pumpkin into a pomegranate! And I was the pomegranate.”

Buck laughed and affectionately slapped him on the shoulder. “Aye, but take heart, you were also the pumpkin.”

The Breton stood up, groaning as he stretched. “Maybe so, Buck, but it hardly changes the pain of the experience to know that.”

Nathan moved forward to stand between the two soldiers.

“Be warned, you will feel weak for some time yet to come. You both bled freely during the transformation and I confess that Josiah and I brought you back from sleep by unnatural means and it will take some time for the effects to wear off.”

Chris rubbed his eyes. “Unnatural?” he repeated slowly. “Is there anything natural about this place? Still, healer, you have my thanks. If we can now just find a way out of this pox-ridden vault I, for one, will be well content.”

“I think you may rest a while yet.” The Ranger gave one of his mocking smiles as he started to walk away. “There is still the small matter of a door to be opened.”

The druid had been pacing relentlessly in front of the furlong-wide portal, each intricately carved panel fully a hundred paces across, for more than an hour. None of the band disturbed him, respecting his need for solitude as he struggled with the conundrum before them; this was the stuff of mages and for once, all the swordsmanship and fighting skill in the world was not going to help them. So they waited.

And waited.

Finally, the grizzled priest moved with a heavy tread to where the others had grouped themselves, shaking his head at the expectant looks then focusing on the still ashen-faced mercenary.

“Vin, I believe the answer to this riddle may lie within you.”

Christiaan, as pale as his bonded counterpart, swung his head to fasten a hard and penetrating glare on the druid. “Because Vin has been here before?”

Josiah leaned on his staff.

“No, because Vin has a store of memories far older than anything you could begin to imagine. Memories that go back to the very dawn of time and although he knows it not, holds within him answers for which questions have not yet been asked.”

Vin scrambled to his feet, his hand on his sword as if he would fight the priest. “You wish to truly drive me mad, priest? I am not willing to surrender to that!”

Josiah sighed. “Willingly or unwillingly, I fear you must.”

“No! I cannot.”

Chris got slowly to his feet, feeling the Galalan’s sudden fear surging through the ethereal link that bound them as one, not understanding but recognising his panic and trying to consciously project his own calming energy to the mercenary. Vin shot a bewildered glance at the Breton then allowed some of the tension to drain out of his body as he ceased to fight the knight's influence.

“You ask too much of me, Josiah! The voices already speak within me,” he admitted with a sigh, “but it’s nothing but waves crashing on the rocks, wind blowing through the trees! I have no control over these memories you implanted. How can I help you when I cannot even help myself?”

“You fear them and so fight their presence,” accused the druid, gently, “You only need to seek a guide from among their number and let them in. Your own fear is the bar that keeps them out.”

“No!” The mercenary spun on his heel and abruptly strode away, his boots ringing on the stone flags as he distanced himself from the others. Chris started to follow, but Josiah’s strong arm held him back.

“Wait. He needs some time. Some space in which to think.”

Chris calmly shrugged off the druid’s grip and started after the younger man. “Wrong, priest. He needs an ally.”

“And we need a key to unlock this riddle!” retorted Josiah, quickly, “Vin could well be that key. Think on that, Sir Knight.”

Chris half-turned and gave a brief nod. “He will do what has to be done,” he answered softly, “He may not know it yet, but I do.”

The blond paladin caught up with the Galalan as he leaned against one of the granite slabs, resting his hands flat on the polished surface, his shoulders hunched and head bowed. Without a word Chris took up station beside him, turning to lean the backs of his thighs against the plinth, not speaking, not judging, just being.

“Why me?” The two words, spoken after long minutes of silence, reflected the mercenary’s crushing doubt.

“Why any of us?”

“That’s no answer, only another question.”

“Because I have no answer.” Chris folded his arms, his voice patient. “Tell me about these memories.”

Vin looked up then, briefly contemplative as he gathered his thoughts. Finally he spoke.

“Imagine a thousand different voices in your head; imagine knowing things you could never know; experiencing things that have never been and through it all not knowing what is a real memory and what is not. That is the legacy Josiah bestowed on me!” He laughed bitterly. “Would that I could give it back.”

“Sometimes the burdens we bear are for a greater purpose.”

“Spoken like a true Church knight!” The Galalan mocked, and then sighed wearily. “I did not ask for any of this.”

“Nor me. Yet here we are, for better or worse. Whatever happens from hereon in we are in this together -- all of us -- and don’t ever forget that. You and I are now bonded as one. It is both a gift and a curse for I can feel your pain, feel your every emotion, as you feel mine, and nothing but death itself can now sever that link. ” He reached out and fastened his fingers around the younger man’s forearm. “Nothing.”

The mercenary shook his head. “I don’t know if I can do it. If I do as Josiah asks, and let these other memories in, how will I ever find myself again?”

Chris stared earnestly into the Galalan’s brilliant blue eyes, a look that demanded trust. “Because I will be your touchstone,” he promised softly, “and I make an oath to you now that I’ll never let you lose your way.”

Vin looked away no longer able to meet the Breton knight’s intense gaze. “I fear the unknown, Chris. I am a simple soldier. Give me a sword and an axe and I will fight; I know nothing else.”

“Then we are more alike than you know, mercenary.” He levered himself away from the granite slab and firmly gripped Vin’s shoulder. “Come. We have work to do, soldier.”

Entranced, the Galalan sat cross-legged on the cold stone floor, his palms resting on his knees as he stared straight ahead, oblivious to his immediate surroundings. He had

not moved or uttered a sound in almost a candlemark and Chris paced restlessly to and fro, his spurs clinking musically in counterpoint to the rhythm of his stride.

“How long must we wait?” Jeh-Di’s impatience was as transparent as the Church knight’s concern.

“Why, son? You have need to be somewhere in great haste? A pressing engagement perhaps?”

Jeh-Di flushed at the Ranger’s sarcasm but held his tongue, not willing to sacrifice himself further to Ezra’s barbed wit. Instead he resigned himself to a long wait, making a conscious effort to emulate the wounded warrior, who seemed to be content to idle the time away rolling dice. The squire jumped in fright as a guttural voice rang out, a single word barked in a tongue he did not recognise. His heart leaped in his chest as he realised the sound came from Vin.

“Canu!”

Seven pairs of eyes fastened on the young mercenary, an expectant hush descending in a collective cessation of breath.

In a verbal torrent, a rush of words poured unchecked from the Galalan. “Seul les pur dans coeur. Canu ynghyd. Chanson ensemble. Unidig. Lan. Calon lan all ganu.” Then silence again.

“What in all hells was that?” breathed Buck, looking quickly a round the group for an answer.

Chris frowned shaking his head.

“Only the pure in heart,” he translated doubtfully, casting a furtive glance in Ranger’s direction, as if it might mean something more to him than he was prepared to reveal.

“They are the words of a song,” added Standish, returning the look with equal caution, “Only the pure in heart can sing. Calon lan. Les pur dans coeur. It is the same song in either tongue; Fen or Breton.”

“And meaning?”

The Ranger shrugged. “Who can say?”

Mairè reached out to rest a hand on Ezra’s knee. “You do not say that he also said to sing together. As one.”

“Not exactly the pastime I had in mind considering the circumstances.” The Ranger responded scathingly. “And now instead of an answer, we have another question to add to the first.” He pushed himself to his feet. “Perhaps if we stay here long enough we can

collect enough riddles to keep us occupied until we slowly die of old age or, more likely, starvation.”

“Ezra!” The warning in Chris’ voice was clear. “I would expect something a little more constructive from you!”

Standish gave an exaggerated and mocking bow. “Forgive me, Sir Christiaan, I forget that I stand in the presence of the mighty Royal Protector and First Knight of the Sword. A lowly Ranger can hardly be expected to rise to such a challenge to the intellect.”

Buck scrambled awkwardly to his feet, hampered by his leg wound, his voice tight. “You insult both Chris and the Church by your remarks, Ranger!”

Ezra laughed bitterly, his hand resting lightly on his sword: “A pox on the church and its knights.” He turned his back on the paladin adding further insult.

The man-at-arms bared steel, the metal singing as it left the scabbard, to find the Ranger already *en garde*, blade in one hand, main gauche in the other as he readied to meet Buck’s impending attack. The two men stared across the space that separated them, blood lust in their eyes and in their hearts.

“Hold fast! That’s enough!” L’Arabee’s voice rang out, echoing through the vault, but he might as well have been whistling to the wind for all the notice either man took.

Buck moved a step forward and Chris hastened to stand between them, unarmed, his own sword still buried deep within the great portal.

“The next man who moves fights me.”

Two pairs of eyes flicked towards the knight, then away again, neither man willing to back down.

“Buck. Yield now or I will have your sword and I will have your shield.”

The man-at-arms paled visibly. Chris was threatening to dismiss him as his lieutenant. He wavered, torn between defending the knight’s honour and incurring his wrath.

“Yield!” The snap of L’Arabee’s voice, now commanding, touched a nerve in soldier and he lowered his sword.

“Ezra?”

Standish blinked and shook his head, a brief flicker of confusion passing across his features before the hard-eyed Ranger again assumed a challenging air. Maintaining his stance, it was clear that he would not concede. Chris shrugged.

“Then, Ranger, you fight me.”

“No, Chris,” warned Mairè, “You must not do this. He is...”

He wordlessly held out his hand to the Fen warrior and with a sigh she surrendered her sword to him, standing back as he hefted the claymore, testing its weight and balance. A collective gasp went through the group as the knight formally saluted the Ranger, understanding that Chris was now deadly serious.

The druid reached out and plucked at the paladin's sleeve, his voice low. "Take care, my son. This is not all it seems. There is some mischief at work here. Ezra is not himself."

"I know," confessed Chris, not taking his eyes off the spymaster, "Great Mother grant that I can disarm him without doing either of us lasting harm."

"The goddess go with you, son."

Chris nodded, accepting the blessing and with a quick intake of breath, prepared to fight the swordsman whose skill with a blade he knew beyond doubt to be equal his own.

The Breton was prepared for the opening *fleche*, and met the Ranger's blade with a smooth counter thrust that saw the younger man quickly *volt* and parry, but Ezra's lightening *riposte* caught him off guard and the flicking tip of the rapier pierced him shallowly in the upper arm. Eyes narrowing he rolled his shoulder, testing the extent of the wound, and overcame the inclination to retreat, instead pressing forward, forcing Standish to yield under the sheer brutal power of his attack. Chris was prepared to sacrifice finesse if it meant a hasty end to this insane contest. Laughing, the Ranger brought his trident into play, holding off the broad-bladed claymore as the two men crashed together, chest to chest. After a brief struggle, Chris freed his sword from the prongs of the wicked-looking three bladed knife and pushed Ezra away, quickly back stepping to put some distance between himself and the sword master. A smoothly executed *balestra* again brought the Ranger within striking distance and the rapier under the knight's guard; only a hasty recovery and parry from the Breton avoided another sword cut. Adjusting his grip on the unfamiliar weapon in his hand he drew a deep breath and feinted with a lunge, before dropping to the ground and rolling onto one shoulder in a less than gallant manoeuvre, which served its purpose nonetheless in unbalancing the Ranger and knocking him to the ground. Gaining his feet a fraction before Standish had time to recover, Chris lashed out with a booted foot and kicked the rapier from his grasp sending the weapon skittering across the flagstones. Breathing hard, he quickly turned the claymore's blade, and as he read the undeniable intent in the Ranger's eyes to press home an attack with the trident in his left hand, he brought the

flat edge of the sword around to strike Standish along the side of the head with all the strength he could muster.

“By the goddess, Chris, you might have killed him!”

“In case you failed to notice, priest, he was trying to do that very thing to me.”

There was no heat in his voice, just a weary acceptance.

“He did turn his blade,” offered Buck, helpfully, “Else Ezra would now be minus half his brainbox.”

Nathan glanced up, still holding a wad of linen to the unconscious man’s bleeding scalp.

“Still, a heavy blow, Chris, and a fortunate thing that Ezra has a hard skull. What in all the hells’ name got into you two?”

The Breton sighed sadly and came to kneel by the Ranger, his hand reaching out to turn Standish’s face towards him. “Some evil mischief,” he responded quietly, “Not of Ezra’s making, nor mine.”

He cast a glance at the mercenary who had remained motionless and unresponsive during the brief altercation, not even a change in expression to mark any awareness of his environment.

“Vin.” Josiah was not posing a question but providing a solution. “An open conduit through which any spirit might pass. It would seem someone -- or something -- has ill intent towards our small band and, briefly, some malcontent spirit possessed our Ranger.”

“Aye. As if we have not troubles enough.”

Nathan dampened a second square of coarse linen, loosening the neck of Ezra’s doublet and undershirt to wipe away some of the blood that had coursed down the Ranger’s neck, and in doing so revealed a glint of gold. He hesitated before drawing an exquisitely crafted chain from concealment, surprised to find a heavy ring suspended from it. Something Ezra obviously wished to keep secret, as he did not wear it openly.

“Show me that!”

Nathan was startled at the urgency in the knight’s voice but obediently opened his palm to show a black gem, a pearl, set in heavy gold. Almost reverently, the Breton picked it up and turned it slowly in his fingers, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the carved surface.

“By the Great Mother, I knew there was something...”

Josiah leaned closer.

"This means something to you?"

"Yes, Priest, it means something to me." Chris laughed softly, then even more quietly: "A worthy knight indeed."

He tucked the ring back inside the Ranger's doublet and looked quickly from one man to the other.

"It is best that you do not speak of this to anyone. I ask that you swear on your honour to keep this between the three of us."

"You have my word, even though I know not what secret I keep."

"And my oath."

Chris nodded, satisfied, and turned his attention back to Standish. "He'll be alright?"

"I think so. He might not remember what happened before you hit him..."

"That may be just as well."

"...and he'll have an aching head. He might even have trouble seeing straight for a little while depending on the weight of the blow."

The Breton got to his feet and looked at the mercenary. "And Vin? Can you wake him?"

"Yes, but do you want to? He has said nothing that would help us."

Chris thoughtfully tugged at his lip. "On the contrary, Josiah. I think he's told us all we need to know."

"A riddle?"

"Or perhaps a command."

"To sing?"

The knight shrugged. "Sometimes the most complex of questions have answers in plain view."

"Now you speak in riddles, Knight."

Chris suddenly grinned. "Once our two sleepers awake, we shall see if I have the right of it."

"Sing? First you try to decapitate me, then you ask that I sing! Surely you jest?" Ezra sat with his knees drawn up providing a support for his arms, which in turn pillowed his head, deliberately not looking at the knight.

"Ezra, you are the finest singer among us and I have already heard you sing the Calon Lan! This is no challenge for you."

Standish raised his head slightly, enough to peer at Chris over his folded arms. "I fear I would be hard pressed to compete with the chorus currently shrieking in my head and the orchestra of bells ringing in my ears."

Chris sighed. "I've said I'm sorry, but you were trying to spit me on that blade of yours."

Ezra lowered his head again. "I don't recall."

The Breton turned to the mercenary who had been quietly rubbing his sword with a square of silk and avoiding any part of the conversation.

"Vin. Do you remember anything of what you said?"

"What *did* I say?"

"You were speaking in Breton and the language of the Fens," prompted Mairè, gently, "but in a voice not your own."

"I don't speak Breton or Fennish," he replied stubbornly, his eyes still upon his blade, "This is more artful magic. I know nothing of what happened, and I wish to know even less than that. I'm tired of being a plaything of both gods and men."

"As we all are, Vin," conceded the paladin, "But we have no choice in the matter."

The mercenary looked up then and sighed, slowly resheathing his sword. "I remember only one voice. A voice that spoke of a pure heart." He frowned suddenly, concentrating. "The door -- this door -- will open only for someone of pure heart."

"Then that surely excludes me!" murmured Standish without lifting his head.

"An allegory perhaps," offered Josiah, "Something which attests to the honest and the virtuous?"

"Or something more literal," countered Nathan, "In which case we must choose the most worthy among us."

Chris moved to stand before the doors. "I think when the time comes that the choice will be made for us, Nathan."

"And now?"

The knight hesitated and smiled. "We sing."

Jeh-Di looked around the group and shook his head, his young face filled with alarm.

"I can't," he stammered, "I can't sing. My mother always said I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket."

Josiah's soft laugh was unexpected. "Jeh-Di, I know nothing that says that only the pure of heart can sing in tune!"

Buck came forward and planted a large hand on the squire's shoulder. "Follow my lead, lad. There are enough of us here to carry a tune as far as the gates of hell itself if necessary."

"Buck has the right of it," encouraged Chris, "You know the words, Jeh-Di?"

"Of course," the younger man protested, "Everyone knows them."

"No excuses then," grinned the man-at-arms.

Chris turned to the others. "Anyone else with doubts?"

"I'm afraid any singing I've done has been after a few jugs of ale in a tavern," confessed Vin, "and in spite of Jeh-Di's conviction, I don't even have his advantage in knowing the words. Sacred songs were not any part of my education."

"I know it only in my own tongue," admitted Mairè, with a shrug, looking at her companions uneasily. "I fear this will surely be as discordant a choir as has ever been heard."

Ezra gave a heavy sigh and looked from one to the next as if judging their abilities.

"Let me see if I have the right of this: Chris, Buck and myself can sing the song in both common and Breton, Mairè and I can sing in Fennish, Vin can sing in common and Galalan - but only after a jug of ale and he knows not the words, Jeh-Di knows the words but claims he cannot sing at all! Nathan? Josiah?"

"I can make a fair showing in common," smiled Josiah, seeing the humour in Ezra's purposely ironic diatribe.

"And I in common and Moorish," added Nathan, "But without some musical accompaniment I cannot vouch for my tunefulness any more than Jeh-Di."

Chris exchanged a glance with the Ranger. "Well, Ezra, you're the expert. What do we do now?"

The Ranger inclined his head in a subtle gesture that suggested the role was not one that pleased him. "And to what do I owe the dubious honour of being made chorusmaster?"

"By virtue of the fact that you were the one who regularly sang for his supper at the tavern," retorted the knight, with a sly grin. "The Mastersinger."

"Mere entertainment for coppers," countered Standish quickly, then with a sudden shake of his head: "This is not for me to do."

He turned and walked away putting a little distance between himself and the others to stand with head down and shoulders slumped, one hand on his sword hilt.

“Ezra?” Chris moved after the Ranger, signalling with a cutting motion of his hand that the others should remain where they were and remain silent. “Ezra, you know this is our only chance.” He paused. “And we need your help.”

“Ah, Chris. This is not for me to do. For out of all assembled here, I am surely the least worthy among us.”

Chris shook his head. “No, not the least,” said Chris, his voice a whisper as he reached to pluck the chain and its burden from inside Ezra’s doublet. “This tells me that much. You are a knight.”

The Ranger slowly lifted his eyes to the older man. “I was a knight.” He responded. No expression altered his features but his green eyes, glittering with suppressed emotion, spoke volumes. “I am no longer, and I am far beyond the laws that govern your order.”

The paladin released his grip on the gold chain and urgently grasped Ezra’s forearm.

“It’s not something you can just give up, Standish. You may have turned your back on the Church; you may call yourself Ranger and you may run from your past, but you are still one of us.”

Ezra laughed bitterly. “The long arm of the Church? She can no longer claim me, Chris. The Black Rose put me beyond her reach.”

“Remember your oath, Ezra?” A gentle reminder.

The younger man rubbed his eyes between thumb and forefinger and sighed. “Aye. Too well sometimes.”

“Then I know you cannot turn away from what is right as easily as you would have me believe.”

“Chris, I’m no longer of you. You know what I am.”

“Yes, I now know *what* you are but I think I am also coming to know, in some small measure, who you are.”

“Then you have the advantage, Sir, because I have lived with deception too long to know where truth ends and the lie begins.”

Chris let his hand fall to his side. “The truth is what I see here and now, Ezra. A man, who has lived, loved, fought, had fears and doubts, shed tears and shared laughter, just like the rest of us although we have all trodden different paths in our lives. Didn’t you say yourself that we have been brought here together for a purpose? It is true that we may yet fail, for who knows what lies ahead beyond that door but you made a promise to me. A season you said, until the Autumn.”

Ezra ducked his head. "On my honour and my life." He repeated softly, remembering the moment in the tavern.

Chris put out his hand and after a moment's hesitation the Ranger responded, the two men linking hands in the fashion of knights. With a smile L'Arabee used his free hand to grip Ezra's upper arm.

"I hold you to that, knight. Don't fail me."

Standish gave a single nod and a brief smile. "The honour may be tarnished and my life held forfeit, but even thus my word is still my bond."

"Then stand by me, and I promise to be your sword and shield, as you will be mine."

"It is done."

The two knights released their grip on each other and drew back a step, turning as one to face the others. With a sudden grin the Ranger moved forward.

"Come! I fear there is some work to be done before we can attempt to quit this pox-ridden Hall, so listen well..."

The Galalan looked dubiously at the scrap of cloth in his hand on which Nathan had hastily scrawled the chorus to the hymn. *A heart that is pure and full of goodness, fairer than the beautiful lily, only a heart that is pure can sing, sing by day and sing by night.* In his experience songs were about bedding women and fighting battles and he felt a little awkward being expected to sing about hearts and flowers. Still, if it was good enough for Chris... Ezra had already spent the best part of an hour patiently coaching them and in the end the Ranger had decided that Jeh-Di and Vin, the weakest singers along with Nathan and Josiah would form the chorus. Ezra, Chris, Buck and Mairè would take the lead and as Ezra had already said: "Great Mother help them all."

Vin had never felt so self-conscious in his life. It was curious enough to be standing in the Halls of the Dead without being asked to do something that made him feel utterly ridiculous. Jeh-Di, a few feet to his right looked no happier, but there was nothing for it but to do as Chris suggested and sing, although he silently vowed that he would only do it once. Even for Chris he would not make a fool of himself more than once. He sighed as Ezra stood in front of them and one by one the group fell silent, waiting, as he prepared to take the lead. The mercenary was not sure what he had expected but the first soft sound of the Ranger's voice caught him completely unawares, a gentle opening that sent a ripple down his spine and set the hair on his forearms on end. By the gods, he might not know the words but he understood the sentiment well enough. As

Standish's voice swelled to be joined first by Mairè, then the complementary deeper tones of Chris and Buck, the Galalan held his breath feeling a thrumming in the air that was more than the four voices weaving through and around each other in a rich and complex harmony.

A nudge from Josiah on his left let him know, too soon he thought, that his turn had come and to his surprise he found himself carried along on a towering wave of song driven by the power of their combined voices, which suddenly became much more than eight singers joined in chorus. The thrumming, at first only a vibration in the air became a buzz, then a murmur of sound that echoed through the vast space, a multitude of voices raised in song above which Ezra's distinctive voice still rang clear and true. Vin's own voice faltered as the sound became all-pervasive, filling him up, becoming a part of him until the very blood coursing through his veins seemed to be humming. Then at last as the chorus ended, the swell of sound receded, ebbing once more as Ezra lead the others into the next verse.

He had heard the Ranger sing before, but this was different and he could feel the fine hairs on his body stirring, a purely emotional response that bypassed the intellect and went straight to the most primeval depths of his soul. The conjoined voices of Chris, Buck and Mairè blended together in flawless harmony and beneath it, the less tangible, but nonetheless constant, drone of a host of unseen voices lending a curious depth to the song. For a man who, by his very nature, saw things in shades of black and white it came as an unexpected revelation and he shook his head, almost afraid of the raw emotion that was coursing through him, his throat suddenly constricting as Ezra's pure tenor, eclipsing all others, soared once again; a sound of absolute perfection.

"By the goddess," he heard Josiah breathe beside him, "Look."

In the time it had taken to complete the first verse and chorus a sliver of light had appeared between the vast doors, no more than a fingerwidth across but an undeniable breach in the huge structure.

"Blood and thunder!" swore Vin gently in an aside to the druid, "Was the Ranger the answer to this all along? It was all for nothing that Chris and I came here?"

"I know not," whispered the priest, "But there is more than chance at work here, Vin, of that I'm sure."

The two men fell silent again as they waited to add their voices to the chorus once again, each trying not to watch the sluggish and ponderous movement of the gigantic portal as it slowly opened.

Chris started the exodus. The doors had barely swung open a hand span when, without breaking the rhythm of the song, he signalled that it was time to move. Buck nodded, reading the battle sign that told him they were to retreat in pairs, and responding with his own signing as he moved to join Jeh-Di that they would go first. Without hesitation Mairè crossed to partner with Josiah while Vin's own signing claimed protection for Nathan, and together in dual file they moved towards the widening gap of light and into the unknown. Finally the Breton and the Ranger moved, falling into step and bringing up the rear as the song drew to a close. The knight signed again, not battle language this time but in the secret code of the Order meaning literally: *As One*. Ezra hesitated, then with a wry smile completed the traditional response. *Ever and Always*.

As the song came to an end the two men reached the narrow opening, Standish holding back to allow the paladin to precede him, the honour of rank that neither man would have thought to question and suddenly in the pace of a heartbeat, the Ranger was alone. The remainder of the companions had already crossed over and now, even L'Arabee had been swallowed by the all-consuming light that spilled from the other side. He stopped abruptly, no longer following, his eye drawn to the sword still jutting from the door. Chris's sword.

The hum that had filled the hall was gently receding and the growing silence almost painful to his ears after the suffusion of sound that had filled every fibre of his being until he had become a part of the music itself. Now, unable to make his limbs obey his command to move, he stared transfixed at the knight's blade. His survival instincts were strongly prompting him to follow, to enter the light and take that final step through the door to join the others, but his sense of honour was urging him just as strongly not to leave without the sword.

He thought he heard a voice faintly shouting his name but suddenly it meant nothing to him, for the sword itself was calling him. The Ranger moved slowly towards the shimmering blade, hearing but ignoring the grinding of the weighty door as it changed direction and started to swing shut on its massive hinges. That the shaft of light, already no broader than his shoulders, was beginning to narrow was of no consequence to him now. There was still a little time. Inexorably drawn by the black-hilted knight's sword he stood for a moment before it, listening. *Take it*. Without any hesitation his left hand closed around the leather-bound grip and he felt the surge of power flow up his arm. Around him the air crackled and spat as tongues of fire rippled along the blade and

licked at his flesh. The sound of his own scream filled his ears as he flung back his head, his mouth opened in a risus of agony, his body wracked by wave after wave of pain that radiated to every fibre, ripping mercilessly through his vitals. A flame burning from within him, robbing him of his will and eating away at his very soul, was devouring him. *Ezra*. A tug at his psyche. *Ezra*. *Fight it*. Bringing his right hand up he took a grip on the sword with both hands, leaning his forehead on the onyx pommel and trying to breathe through lungs that seemed to be on fire. As a red mist settled over his vision he finally drew a sobbing breath that he felt would be his last and with muscles bunched, biceps and forearms bulging, he wrenched at the blade with all the remaining strength he possessed, tears of frustration and pain coursing down his cheeks. Then he was falling, down and down, and as he fell he summoned a name, long dormant, in a plea for the Great Mother's aid: "JAHENNA HELP ME!"

The cold enveloped him like a shroud and he shivered, his whole body shaking as successive waves of tremors gripped him. Vague pain, becoming steadily more intense, registered through dulled senses, flowing up his arm from his hand, which burned in fierce contrast to the pervasive chill which still held him fast. There was a soft murmur of sound but too far away for him to use as an anchor to find his way, and he worked his throat trying to speak but could find no voice.

*Wind Walker*. The word souged gently in his consciousness, felt rather than heard. One name among many in his lifetime. So many to remember. Which one was he? He knew then that he was lost and a sense of utter despair threatened to overwhelm him as he felt his tenuous hold on the already insubstantial stuff of life begin to fade. *EZRA!* He jerked violently drawing a sharply convulsive breath, welcome air suddenly inflating his almost stilled chest and once more the shadows were driven back but, as if newly awakened, pain flowed like molten lead through his veins.

Against his will he was being lifted, raised up, with insistent hands moving and supporting him, then he understood quite suddenly that this was no illusion. Filtering through his senses was a different pain; the solid stuff of reality that he knew too well. His chest hurt as if he had inhaled noxious fumes that had seared his lungs and each breath was a challenge but the fog clouding his mind was lifting by degrees -- and he remembered. He struggled, a desperation born of panic, a need to be free of the unnamed dread that filled every fibre of his being.

The sword.

“Ezra, don’t fight me. There is nothing to fear. Be easy.” The words were gentle, the Moor’s familiar voice calming, and the Ranger surrendered, as much because he had no strength against the hands that were restraining him as trusting in the healer’s attentions. “Let me help you.”

Nothing to fear.

A flask was touched to his lips and he drank, the honeyed elixir soothing his raw throat as he swallowed eagerly then coughed.

“Holy Mother,” he whispered hoarsely, “I thought I had died.”

“That may be closer to the truth than you know.” Chris. Somewhere close beside him. “And indeed still not out of the question once Nathan gives me permission to lay hands on you!” He blinked, trying to fix on the voice but his sight was not fully restored and he wearily closed his eyes finding the sheer effort of concentration too much to contemplate. He felt a hand briefly touch his forearm. “Gods, Ezra, what were you thinking of?”

The Ranger understood that there was no censure in the words and, in spite of the pain in his left hand, he managed a crooked smile.

“I believe I may have lost my senses for a brief moment.”

“And almost your life.” Nathan. Critical in his concern. “If Chris had not risked all to return...” He stopped abruptly, and Ezra could imagine the Breton knight signalling the healer to silence. That would be his way.

With a rasping sigh, he forced his eyes open continuing to fight the creeping lethargy that threatened to render him stupefied. Gods, but his arm was on fire. He finally succeeded in bringing Nathan’s face into focus, and was in no way reassured by the expression of unease that he read there. His thoughts might still sluggish but not so much that could fail to understand that all was not well. He stirred, suddenly feeling a flicker of fear, but both Chris and Nathan held him effortlessly and he was forced to yield.

“Healer?” There was doubt and fear in his voice.

It was L’Arabee who answered.

“You fared ill when you took the sword up, Ezra,” supplied the Breton, sadly, “I cannot truly say what happened but when I came upon you it was though you had been lightning struck. Your arm ...”

The sword.

Standish turned his head, a hollow dread settling in the pit of his stomach. Burned. Let it not be so. Yet he already knew it for the truth. The length of his exposed left arm, the sleeve of his blouson now cut away, was a mass of ugly, reddened weals that wound dramatically in a spiral from his wrist to his shoulder, the path of the flame clearly etched into his skin. Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, he slowly tried to unclench his fisted hand, the pain flaring anew at the movement. Breathing deeply and shuddering with the effort, he forced his hand to open wide, the tendons taut as he struggled against the pain of it. His palm was a ruin of blackened, blistered flesh, and with a stifled hitching breath, a brief betrayal of his emotions, he relaxed his hand once more allowing the fingers to curl back over the palm and slowly turned his face away.

“I’m sorry, Ranger. I will do what I can but these burns are deep and perhaps beyond my skill.”

Ezra closed his eyes for a moment, trying to gather scattered wits, hiding his shock and burying deep his first instinct to scream denial. He nodded, not able to speak, retreating into the depths of his consciousness and allowing himself to surrender, without a fight, to the darkness that again reached out to claim him.

Vin moved quietly, his tread soft, his left hand stilling the movement of his sword in its scabbard as he paused a moment to listen. He was not certain that Chris would appreciate his company but the paladin had separated himself from the group some time ago and the mercenary was becoming concerned that he had not returned. If nothing else the bond between them that Josiah had forged with his magic gave him some awareness of the Breton’s feelings and that insight told him that L’Arabee was in turmoil, that he was suffering, and by association the Galalan was feeling that pain with him. A pale reflection no doubt, but enough to prompt him to seek the knight out. His rough soldierly pragmatism may not allow him to fully understand the reasons behind Chris’ disquiet but he surely understood the emotion.

Chris knelt in the traditional knight’s stance with but one knee touching the ground, his sword -- the sword for which Ezra had almost sacrificed his life -- before him, held point down as both hands clasped the hilt and he rested his forehead on the onyx pommel. His lips moved although Vin could hear nothing of what he said; yet he knew beyond any doubt that the Breton was not merely seeking solace in his faith. This was no simple prayer, but a heartfelt appeal to his godhead for aid. While he could not say with any great conviction that he had any faith of his own beyond that he could put in a

well-balanced sword or a razor sharp battle-axe, the knight's unfeigned devotion touched the mercenary deeply.

He started to back away, loathe to intrude on such a private moment, but the Breton rose smoothly and turned, marking him with ease although Vin knew that he was both in shadow and had made no sound as he approached. The knowledge that someone was so finely tuned to his every thought and feeling disturbed him, and yet he trusted Chris implicitly; this was a strange bond indeed that permitted men to look into each other's hearts with no benefit of artifice to shield them.

"Stay, Mercenary. I am finished."

Vin sighed and moved into the light. "I did not intend to disturb you."

"And you did not." Chris looked thoughtfully down at the knight's sword in his hand, still unsheathed, and ran a thumb across the leather bound hilt. "This was my great-grandfather's sword, Vin."

The apparent non sequitur merely caused the mercenary to nod his head. It was so with knights. It was common practice that each novice on acceptance into an order brought with him his own weapon, traditionally a weapon handed down from father to son in an unbroken lineage. He waited for Chris to continue.

"I would have left it."

"Perhaps that was as it was meant to be."

Chris tilted his head to one side considering the soldier's words. "Perhaps," he agreed finally. "And yet the Ranger would not."

Vin looked down at the floor, choosing his next words carefully. "The Ranger now lies sorely wounded. Is this some penance you seek for yourself? To take his place? Too late, Chris, for what is done is done and it serves no purpose to dwell on what might have been."

"You don't understand."

The Galalan moved forward a step. "No, you're wrong. I do. You're assuming a guilt to which you have no claim."

The paladin shook his head, and Vin understood how heavily the burden of Ezra's injuries lay upon his conscience. He was the first knight of the realm, the most honoured, and in his eyes he had failed.

"I hear your words, Vin, but it eases not the load."

Impulsively the mercenary moved to within a hand's breadth of the knight and fastened a strong hand around his upper arm. "Then at least let me be the one to share

it."The Breton took one last look at the sword in his hand and raising it, rammed the blade home into its sheath, with a tight smile on his face.

"You already do, my friend. You already do."

It burned. Like the all the fires of the seven hells it consumed him; pain beyond endurance as the flames devoured his flesh and seared his very soul. There was no escape. He had called on the Great Mother herself and the answering silence had mocked him. Now he was dying. In his mind a voice urged him to surrender, to give up the sword and be free of the pain or give up his life, but he could not -- or would not -- yield the blade, so instead he prepared to martyr himself. He was aware of falling, through an endless darkness in which he saw distant pinpoints of lights winking progressively out of existence and he knew that when the last one was snuffed out that he would surely die.

*"Ezra! Ye Gods, what have you done?"*

He was a child again, standing before his step-father, the sword of his true father clasped defiantly in his eleven-year old hands.

"Nothing."

"Nothing....." prompted the man, expecting more.

"Nothing.....father." The word almost choked him. This man was not his father and never would be.

"Give that to me." He held his hand out for the weapon. "You are too young to make a plaything of such a fine blade."

Ezra stuck out his chin, and firmed his stance although he knew the outcome of his bravado would most likely be a sound beating.

"This was my father's sword and so, by right of inheritance, mine."

The man laughed unpleasantly.

"For a penniless boy, with a roof over his head only due to my largesse, you have a bellyful of pluck but you will do as I say or you will feel the cut of the strap on your back, lad."

He swallowed, refusing to be cowed, although his knees were like jelly as he spoke. "Sir, if you lay a hand on either me or my mother but once more, you have my word that one day I shall gut you as you sleep," he took a deep breath before he continued, "like the stinking pig that you are."

The man paled then laughed shakily, unable to misinterpret the sincerity in the piercing green eyes that met his unwaveringly.

"Brave words for a bastard runt. Still, if it means so much to you that you would defy me and risk a beating, take the sword and go, before I change my mind and thrash you to within an inch of your worthless, pox-blighted life."

He did not need a second invitation, but neither did he run. Instead he bowed with all the grace he could muster and withdrew, emulating the courtly good manners of the knights who had once graced Standish Hall.

*"Ezra! Do you hear me? For the love of all the saints and martyrs, speak to me!"*

He was no longer falling. Someone was holding him, raising him up and in those arms he felt suddenly secure.

"I have the sword....."

"Great Mother, but I know that, Ezra..." The voice was almost a whisper and charged with emotion. "...and you shame me."

He struggled briefly, the creeping tendrils of panic and dread pricking again at his consciousness. No shame. Had he not salvaged the family honour once and for all? The debt was cancelled. There could be no shame in that.

"No..."

"Be still now."

He cried out unwittingly as he was moved, his body protesting the rough treatment and he heard close by his ear: "Forgive me, Ezra, but we have little time." Then he was being lifted and he understood, even in his confusion, that he was being carried across someone's shoulder. Through his growing awareness of pain, his sluggish mind began to slowly reconstruct a picture, but before he could make sense of the disconnected images he slipped effortlessly back into the void of blessed unconsciousness.

"Where are we exactly?"

Jeh-Di walked slowly forward then stopped, uncertainty clouding his youthful features as he turned back to the druid. Josiah moved up beside him staring into the dark recesses of the natural cavern.

"Make a guess and it will be as close as anything I could venture, son. We have left the Halls, that is certain enough, yet still we walk on dressed stone and I feel we are nowhere that would afford us any great comfort."

"If we were sent here for a purpose, Josiah, I can see no clear path for us. We have overcome one challenge only to have another placed in our way." He looked back to where Nathan, Buck and Mairè clustered around the still form of the Ranger. "How many trials do we need to overcome to move forward and how can we move forward if we know not where we are going?"

The priest rested a hand on his former apprentice's shoulder. "Good questions, Jeh-Di, for which I have no answer but I have this advice: trust in the power of what is both right and good."

Jeh-Di rested a hand on his borrowed sword, and tilted his head in a thoughtful attitude. "Will that be enough?"

"The Goddess grant that it is."

"And Ezra? What of the Ranger? Is this a judgement?"

The druid followed the younger man's gaze. "A test I believe, not a judgement."

"A test? Of what?"

"Of faith, my son," sighed the priest, "But just who is being tested remains to be seen."

"You talk in riddles, Josiah," responded Jeh-Di, tiredly, "and still we are no clearer as to our quest or which direction we should now take."

Josiah shook his head and laughed.

"As always, Jeh-Di you have no patience for the obscure. I have every faith that the way will become clear, we just have to be ready for the signs. So if nothing else heed this, my son: be of open mind."

The squire frowned, his expression serious as he digested the druid's words, then nodded slowly before his attention was captured by the re-emergence from the shadows of the knight closely followed by the mercenary.

"Chris and Vin have returned."

"As should we, Jeh-Di. I think the time for counsel has come."

L'Arabee stood over the apothecary and the stricken Ranger, his expression sombre.

"There's no change then?"

Nathan shook his head. "And there will be none for some little time yet. The elixir I gave him will not only numb the pain but cause him to sleep deeply."

The paladin studied the younger knight, his face relaxed now in untroubled sleep, but the memory of finding his twisted, agonised body, a charred hand gripping the smoking blade was an image seared in his memory. Gods, but he had thought him dead! And for

what? A sword. A symbol. Chris dropped to a crouch beside the Ranger and reached out to touch the pale cheek, shocked at the coldness of it against his own warm flesh. His sea green eyes reflected his fear as he looked to the healer.

"Nathan..."

"Don't fret. Trust me. Truly, he only sleeps."

"By the saints, Nathan, he feels like death." The paladin shuddered as if the chill had entered his own bones. "Can we not warm him?"

"You have some means by which we might?" The apothecary's voice was uncharacteristically sharp, quickly mellowing as he continued wearily. "We have nothing but the clothes we stand up in, Chris."

The knight rose abruptly at the approach of the druid and the young squire, his face set in an expression of fixed determination. He held out his hand.

"Josiah. Your cloak."

The priest made no comment but released the shoulder clasp securing the garment and passed it to the paladin, taking no offence from Chris' demand, recognising that L'Arabee had been under a strain since bringing the injured Ranger back through the portal with barely a moment to spare before the door closed for good behind them.

"He fares ill?"

"He sleeps," responded Nathan, patiently, "but the sleeping draught robs the body of its natural heat."

L'Arabee covered the Ranger with the plain woollen robe and drew back, transferring his worried gaze to the priest. "We must leave this place. Now!"

"Agreed, but think of Ezra. Should he be moved?"

"I don't think we have any choice, Josiah."

Buck moved forward, pushing past the druid. "Chris, I share your eagerness to leave but I think we should send a scouting party first. Who can say where this cavern leads? We may be walking into a trap."

Chris rubbed at the bridge of his nose as if tired and gave a deep sigh. "Buck, we are already in the trap, and there is nowhere for us to go but to follow where the path leads us but if you must, take Vin and Jeh-Di."

The man-at-arms nodded then reached out and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Be ready to move when we return. I feel it in my bones that we must make haste when the time comes. In truth this place puts the fear of the gods into me, Chris, and I would rather we stayed no longer than we have to."

“Make no mistake, I’m with you, Buck. Now go. We will be ready.”

The soldier grinned. “I’m counting on you, Knight. Don’t disappoint me.”

As intended, Chris gave a brief laugh at Buck’s effrontery, recognising his friend’s deliberate ploy to remind him of not only his position but also the need for him to take command. Impulsively he grasped Buck’s forearm in a soldier’s clasp.

“Take care, my brother.”

The man-at-arms released the knight and formally saluted, a rare mark of respect from the soldier.

“Watch your own back, Chris.” He wheeled and strode away, his voice echoing through the vast cavern as he called for his cohorts. “Vin! Jeh-Di! Arm yourselves. We leave now!”

The mercenary and the squire silently gathered their weapons, Jeh-Di smiling his thanks as Vin wordlessly tossed him his battle axe, understanding the show of faith that the soldier was putting in him by the gesture. At a jog the two men joined Buck and within moments the trio had vanished into the dark shadows of the cavern. As they left, Mairè moved quietly to crouch beside Ezra, reaching out and resting one hand lightly on his hip as she bowed her head, her lips moving in prayer. One by one, the druid, the healer and the knight joined the warrior, each offering up a votive of their own, silently willing the Ranger’s recovery.

Ezra stirred, muttering fretfully, his words indistinct but the frown etched deeply into his brow reflecting his disquiet as he tossed restlessly, as if trying to escape some inner torment. The others drew back as, worried, Nathan pressed his fingertips to the Ranger’s neck, feeling his life force pulsing slowly but steadily there before touching his hand to Ezra’s forehead. He shook his head answering the unspoken questions from the others.

“He sleeps still, and his heart is strong, it is but his dreams that trouble him.”

Chris rose slowly and moved a few steps away, and bowed his head as he gripped the sword at his side, murmuring quietly: “Or his memories.”

Josiah sank into a cross-legged pose at the Ranger’s right shoulder and laid his staff across his knees, as beside him Mairè took Ezra’s head onto her lap and gently stroked his face as a mother might a fretful child.

“You know something, or you are merely guessing?”

“Secrets within secrets, Josiah,” the knight answered with a non-committal shrug, “Isn’t this the way of the Rangers?”

“And you, the first among knights, can you claim to have no secrets of your own?”

Chris turned back to face the priest with a wry smile.

“For all that, I am but a man, Josiah, and for good or ill, all men have secrets. Even Church knights.”

Josiah laughed. “From what I know they are the worst. What deeds have been done in the name of the Great Mother that the Church may wish buried for all time?”

Chris shook his head. “If you expect any argument from me, priest, then you will be disappointed. I merely serve, I do not question.”

“A dangerous tenet perhaps, my son?”

“On the contrary. One of absolute pragmatism and, might I add, necessary for survival.” He straightened, squaring his shoulders and moved back to the Ranger’s side. “Private thoughts and public deeds do not always make for contented bedfellows.”

Buck quickly established a rapid pace that Vin had no difficulty sustaining but which soon found Jeh-Di lagging behind. The young squire was fit and healthy enough but the ease of the loose-limbed stride that the man-at-arms and the mercenary seemed to have perfected eluded the youth. Jeh-Di had lost count of the endless furlongs they had already travelled, their way lit only by a meagre glow of light from a curious device that Buck had produced from his pack and kindled with a spark from his tinder box, and was feeling the strain in his arm from carrying the heavy battle axe when Vin stopped abruptly and held out his arm to signal a halt.

“Up ahead. See; a light.”

Buck stepped forward and shielded the glow lamp with his palm, as the squire peered ahead and tried to decide if there was indeed a light in the far distance or he was still seeing the dots of colour before his eyes from the unshielded lamp. He trusted Vin but found it hard to believe that the soldier had pinpointed a light source when he could see no clearly defined change in the quality of darkness ahead.

“Aye,” agreed Buck, “Trident formation at half pace?”

“Suits me.”

Jeh-Di glanced from one man to the other, praying one of them would enlighten him as to the meaning of their arcane exchange and suddenly feeling very unsure of himself. These were seasoned veterans and he was a raw and untried hopeful who had shown some natural talent with an axe. If they had to fight he was sure he would be a hindrance

rather than any aid to the two men. To his immense relief Vin turned and gripped his shoulder.

“We move forward like this.” He explained, spreading his fingers and tucking his thumb and smallest finger beneath his palm to demonstrate three prongs, the middle one slightly ahead of the two flanking ones. “Buck will take point, you stay on his right, three paces behind and two paces out, I’ll take the left flank. Just maintain position and if we’re obliged to engage, stay out of Buck’s way and provide support.” His face suddenly lost some of its intensity and he slapped the squire on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll watch your back.”

They moved forward in echelon, but it was several minutes before Jeh-Di finally located the light source that Vin had first identified. Hells, the man had eyes like a cat. He was sure that Buck would hear his heart hammering in his chest, so loud it seemed to his own ears but the man-at-arms kept moving without a backward glance at his right-hand man, and before long the light had become bright enough for Buck to extinguish his own lamp.

“We may be in luck, Vin,” he whispered, and Jeh-Di could tell that he was smiling, “This looks promising.”

The mercenary grunted as the man-at-arms signalled a halt. “I’d rather not count my chickens just yet, Buck.”

“How much will you wager me that we have found open air?” He breathed deeply. “Can’t you smell it, Vin?”

Jeh-Di sniffed cautiously. Buck was right, there was a definite freshening of the musty air that they had been breathing for so long. In fact he was certain now that he smelled the familiar scent of new mown hay.

“I’ll trust what I see with my own eyes,” responded Vin, “And I’ll make no wager on it.”

The man-at-arms chuckled softly. “Parsimony is no virtue, mercenary!”

“Nor is it a curse,” parried the younger man, quickly, “now do we advance or not?”

Buck sighed and shrugged. “Have it your way. Party advance.”

The light was painfully bright after the long hours they had spent in semi-darkness, and Jeh-Di found himself blinking as his irises contracted in self-defence but it seemed that Buck really was right. He could smell the fresh scent of grass, the clean woody smell of fir and the earthy tang of newly turned fields but to his surprise Buck stopped and drew the three of them to one side, keeping to the shadows.

“Vin?”

The mercenary nodded and seemed to know exactly what was expected of him although no words were exchanged, and with great care Vin made his way forward, pausing at the very mouth of the cavern before suddenly slipping out of sight.

“What if this is a trap, Buck,” questioned Jeh-Di, “What if...”

The man-at-arms put a hand on the squire’s arm, silencing him. “We shall find out soon enough, Jeh-Di. Be patient, but be ready.”

The youth nodded. Be ready. He gripped the polished haft of the axe and waited.

He had begun to doze before the mercenary returned, surprisingly with two staves cut from a tree. He was grinning as he squatted on his haunches in front of the two men.

“If I did not know better I would say we were in the eastern reaches of my own country. There is no immediate danger that I can see, but there is game a plenty and there is a spring of fresh water not too far distant. We can make camp here.”

“And the staves?” questioned Jeh-Di, “What of those?”

Vin looked quickly at the trimmed branches, each equal to his height.

“Unless there has been a great change in our absence, we shall be obliged to carry the Ranger. These shall be the framework of a litter. Basic to be sure, but better than nothing.”

Buck clapped him on the shoulder. “A good thought, Vin. Now let us return with the news. I fancy we shall all be glad to see the back of these caverns, although where we are the Great Mother only knows.”

With a nod Vin rose again. “No doubt we shall find out soon enough, but I for one will be more than glad to leave this dark and unfriendly place behind me. Now come, let’s waste no more time.”

Again the two soldiers set off at a lope and Jeh-Di broke into a trot that, while not as elegant as their more fluid and effortless action, allowed him to at least keep up with them, and he wondered how long it would take him to master the ways of the soldier, or if indeed he ever would.

Mairè was on her feet a moment before Chris heard the rhythmic tattoo of footsteps at double-pace and the familiar percussive jingle of weapons and armour, signalling the return of the advance party. He listened closely and smiled as Mairè held up first one finger, then two more. No unwelcome guests then and, it seemed, no one in pursuit. Always a good sign. The knight moved forward, eager to learn what the trio had

discovered. With any luck there would be something more than this endless night ahead for them.

Vin appeared from the tunnel first, followed a short time later by a limping Buck, his wound obviously troubling him but for all that not delaying him by much, while a flushed and panting Jeh-Di brought up the rear. Chris smiled guessing that the ground-eating pace that a regular foot-soldier like Vin would have been able to sustain had proved a challenge for the young squire. It said something for his determination that he had been able to keep up as well as he did. He had known Galalan infantrymen who could outlast a cavalry mount.

True enough, the mercenary had barely raised a sweat and although his chest heaved from the exertion, he was a long way from being spent. He halted in front of the paladin, delivering a half-salute out of habit, before he rested the two head-high staves he carried on the ground and casually leaned on them

"There's a glade with fresh water and good game. I saw no signs of dwellings or people, just open land as far as the eye could see. We could easily make a defensible camp by the spring." He smiled suddenly. "But even if there were a hundred Ragnathans out there I would still counsel that we leave this place. The darkness and damp becomes wearing and I crave to be outdoors again."

Chris nodded. "I'm with you, Vin. To be breathing fresh air again, not the stale stuff of these caverns." He turned to Buck. "Agreed?"

The man-at-arms nodded. "Aye. A pox on living like bats in a cave, but we have little choice in the matter anyway. Soon we need to find food. Our supply of water is fast running out and I think we could all do with a little touch of sunlight."

Vin picked up the staves again. "If we fashion a litter, then we have no need to wait for Ezra to waken and we can make better time than if one of us is obliged to carry him."

Chris nodded. "Then, come, let's not waste any more time. I fear we have squandered too much already and we know not what time is still left to us."

oooOOOooo

At first he thought he was dead; a spirit ascending to the Great Mother, which surprised him because he held a firm conviction that he was a soul damned to the hells for his sins. Yet, he doubted that a spirit would feel pain and he did. His arm still burned and the wound in his right side throbbed in time with the beat of his heart. Not dead then.

“Ezra.”

No.

“Wind Walker, do you hear me? I want you to wake up now.”

The Ranger struggled to hold onto the comforting darkness he had mistaken for death but, so summoned, he could not. A light hand touched his face, warm against his own cool skin, and almost against his will his eyelids fluttered.

“Ah, so you do hear, my friend. I thought you may yet sleep another day away.”

Another day? Confused, Ezra drew a deep breath, filling his lungs with air, and tried to gain some control over his sluggish and disordered thoughts. Attempting to sit up, he immediately put a hand to his head, regretting the thoughtless haste of his action. Ye gods, but he felt as if he had drunk an entire keg of karak to himself. Sinking back, he tried not to dwell on the dull thudding in his temples, the ache in his side or the burning of his arm but through the discomfort it slowly filtered into to his battered consciousness that he was outdoors and that he could feel sun on his face and smell the clean freshness of grass, leaf and tree. A dream surely? He opened his eyes again and stared for a moment at the startlingly blue sky overhead.

“What is this place?” It was a struggle to form the words.

“We don’t know.”

Ezra gave a short laugh and pushed himself up on his right elbow, wincing as he felt the warning tug of the partially healed wound in his side, scant seconds before he remembered the reason for the pain in his arm. Sobering, he glanced down at the still bandaged limb unable to keep his emotions in check as the memory of his blistered and blackened palm came back to him. He turned his face from the Fen warrior as he struggled for control, only lifting his head once he had schooled his expression to again conceal his feelings. Mairè, he knew, would not judge him but a lifetime of pretence dictated his reactions as much as it directed his actions. He had long experience of burying his feelings deep and he would make no exception now. He glanced around at the empty glade.

“Where are the others?”

“Vin and Buck went with Chris. They seek horses and yesterday Vin found tracks when he was out hunting. Josiah took JD to forage for food and Nathan has gone to find herbs to replenish his stock.”

“So, the great warrior is left to tend the wounded?”

Mairè leaned forward and cuffed him playfully. “I offered to stay. As your kinswoman I

have a duty.”

The Ranger carefully eased himself upright, grateful for the Fen woman’s arm to steady him as he sat up. “And I thought it was because you cared about me,” he teased, gently lifting his injured arm to rest in his lap.

Mairè moved closer until they sat with shoulders touching, the woman finger-combing his hair as she met his eyes with a smile. “It is good that you are with us again, Wind Walker. I feared that you would not find your way back to us.”

Ezra thoughtfully rubbed his chin, feeling the unwelcome rasp of stubble like emery beneath his fingers. “Just how long did I sleep?”

“Two days we have camped here. Nathan gave you a potion to keep you in a state that almost mirrored death, else he said the pain would be too great for you to bear.” She gently rested a hand on his bandaged arm, her fingers barely touching. “It seems to trouble you little now but I know you wear a warrior’s face.”

Standish smiled at the suggestion that he was hiding his pain. “It’s like a slow burning fire, Mairè, but it’s...” He hesitated, seeking the right word but settled for: “...bearable.”

The woman nodded. “I think the healer’s salves have done much to lessen the damage and ease the hurt. One of the reasons he has gone foraging is that his supply of medicines is all but exhausted.” She leaned forward and felt the growth of beard on his face. “You should bathe and shave, Wind Walker. There is a spring yonder.” She drew her dirk from its sheath. “You may use my blade, it has an edge better than any razor.”

Ezra accepted the knife, aware that the gesture was full of hidden meaning. “Of that I have no doubt.”

With a stifled groan, the Ranger awkwardly rolled to his knees, knowing he would have had little chance of gaining his feet if Mairè had not lent her support, although once standing he felt more confident of being able to remain that way. The Fen warrior snorted as she steadied him, her sharp words in truth echoing his own thoughts. “Hah, you have the strength of a newborn colt. Without my help you’ll probably fall in the water and drown!”

“Mairè, believe me when I say I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for a long time. I think even I can manage to take a bath and shave -- alone -- without endangering my health further.”

The blonde woman tipped her head to one side and carefully scrutinised the wounded Ranger with a mischievous smile on her lips.

“So proud! You think I’ll...” She paused trying to find the appropriate words. “...take advantage of you?”

At that Standish finally laughed. “You forget, I know you and I know your Fen ways too well, dear lady and I am in no position to defend myself.”

Mairè shook her head, seeming to find the whole situation suddenly amusing. “And if I promise as your kinswoman that you are safe with me?”

“Ai, Mairè, even so the choice is a difficult one.”

“You do not trust me?”

“I trust you with my life,” he sighed, “but I’m not sure I can trust you with my heart.”

She looked at him for several seconds, a slight frown creasing her forehead, then linked her arm through his and started forward. “You say the strangest things, Ranger; you know that as one of the Chosen the Fens already claim you heart and soul. Now come, I will show you where you can bathe -- in private. But be warned, I shall not be far away.”

The Fenwoman was true to her word. She left him alone after helping him with his boots, but as he slipped into the pool, he could see that she had taken up station not thirty paces away. With a wry smile he stood with the water to his waist and began to slowly unwind the bandage from his arm.

The Galalan hit the ground with a thud that drove the air from his lungs, cursing as the rope he had been gripping snaked through his hands like something alive, flaying skin from his palms until he was finally able to release his hold. The string of invective, delivered in several different languages, that followed as he nursed a bleeding hand and got to his feet prompted a deep laugh from the man-at-arms who had jogged quickly to his side.

“Eating dirt again, Vin?”

“Pox-ridden beast,” he muttered as he spat on his hand and wiped the dirt and blood on his leggings, “If you ask me, we should forget this idea. We can’t even catch one of the bastards.”

Buck slapped the mercenary on the shoulder. “I can tell you this for nothing, once Chris has set his mind on something, we see it through or die trying.”

Vin snorted ruefully as he dusted himself off. “That’s what worries me most!”

The mustached soldier grinned and, certain that the Galalan had not suffered any injury, sprinted back towards the Breton who had cornered the animal and was struggling to hold the horse alone while trying to avoid the flailing hooves.

“Come on! Chris has him.” Buck’s excitement was evident and with a groan, Vin followed although he failed to share the rampant enthusiasm for the task at hand that seemed to grip the other two men.

They had tracked a small herd of horses for the best part of the morning and with some cunning strategies from Chris, the three of them had managed to channel the beasts into a blind run. The Breton wanted the stallion, a big grey that stood taller than Vin at the shoulder, a seemingly impossible task but both men had assured him that if they captured the herd leader then the mares would follow. The Galalan had been given no choice in the matter, the battle lines were drawn and he had taken his orders the same as he would for any engagement. After two hours of being bested by an animal, Vin was beginning to think he would rather take on a battalion of Ragnathan’s single handedly. At least then there might be some chance of success.

“Vin! Quick, get the rope!”

The mercenary scrambled forward and, ignoring the raw pain of the rope burns across his palms, snared the lariat’s end and again took up the slack. Thankfully the stallion was tiring and as Chris persevered, yard by yard shortening the rope, the big grey was forced to submit, albeit unwillingly. Finally secured between two trees, the horse stood with all four feet on the ground, sides heaving and flecked with foam as it glared malevolently at the three men.

Chris, breathing heavily and sweating almost as much as the grey, dropped wearily to the ground, to lie flat on his back with his arms spread wide as he started to laugh.

“Gods, but that was a worthy fight.”

Vin crouched and looked askance at the knight as he examined his bloodied hands, carefully picking at rope fibres and torn skin as he spoke.

“Then you’re sorely pressed for entertainment, my friend. I, for one, would not feel in the least deprived if I never had to do that again.”

The man-at-arms, squatted beside the mercenary and nudged him in the ribs.

“That’s what you get from a foot-slogger, Chris. No appreciation for the finer things in life.”

The Breton sat up, unable to conceal his elation. “Just look, Vin! Isn’t he magnificent?”

The mercenary glanced up at the animal and away again, clearly unimpressed.

"All I see is a bloody great horse, Chris. One that would like to smash any one of us under those hooves given half a chance. Forgive me if I don't see the beauty in that."

Chris and Buck exchanged an almost pitying glance and delivered their derisory verdict almost in unison: "Footslogger!"

"And proud of it," retorted the Galalan, smartly responding to the playful insult, "At least I only have to take care of myself, not spend half my time searching for fodder and the other half resting a pampered beast. Cavalry always were the glory seekers -- all flash and no substance."

Chris picked up a convenient acorn from the ground and aimed it at the mercenary. "I'll remember that next time I -- and my glory seekers -- have to haul your backside out of the fire, Mercenary!"

Vin ducked avoiding the missile the Breton had accurately pitched at his head, laughing and feeling a sudden, inexplicable lightening of spirit. For a moment the three of them said nothing, but the shift in mood was tangible and the grins remained in place, even as Chris got to his feet with a sigh and looked first at the stallion then at the Galalan.

"Ready for another fight, Vin?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

The water was cool but not enough to be unpleasant, and the gentle ripple of the water as the pool was continually refreshed from a gushing spring that tumbled musically over rocks worn smooth over eons of time, had a curiously soothing effect on the Ranger. Ezra, in fact, found himself loathe to quit the grotto once he had finished bathing and instead floated lazily just beneath the surface of the water, warmed by the sun and for the first time in recent memory untroubled by either the pain of his arm or the wound in his side. He had not yet looked at the burn, averting his eyes as he had stripped off the bandage and quickly submerged himself in the water, but he now noticed that his hand and shoulder moved ever more freely and the absence of pain prompted him to risk a glance at the scarred and damaged limb. Initially, he hesitated, bringing his closed fist out of the water, reluctant to look again on the charred and blistered palm that had filled him with such despair. Slowly he opened his fingers, surprised that the suppleness seemed to have returned and almost with a sense of wonder he spread open his hand,

gasping softly as he stared at, not a blackened scar but an intricately traced device miraculously embossed on his skin. In awe, he tentatively rubbed the curious motif with the fingers of his right hand. His breath caught in his throat as he recognised the familiar device. Was it not the very same insignia emblazoned on L'Arabee's sleeve? The same symbol he had once worn with all the proud arrogance of a young knight? The head of a snake, forked tongue darting along his middle finger covered his palm and as he lifted his arm from the water, his stomach clenched, his disbelieving eyes following the sinuous crimson body of the tattooed serpent winding its length around his forearm, encircling his well-formed biceps until its whip like tail terminated with a flourish across his left shoulder. The symbol of the Order of the Sword.

"Great Mother," he breathed, his voice catching in his throat, "What sorcery is this?"

Rising to his feet, the water streaming in rivulets from his muscular torso, he waded to the edge of the pool and easily vaulted onto the surrounding parapet of flat stones warmed by the sun, impatiently flicking his wet hair out of his eyes and hastily securing his breech-cloth around his hips. He was breathing quickly, at once alarmed and excited, unsure of what had happened to him in the pool but feeling a glowing warmth spread through his veins that had little to do with the sun that now caressed his back. Again he held out his arm, the serpent seeming to writhe and ripple from shoulder to wrist as the bunching muscles moving beneath his skin gave it a life of its own and again he was awestruck by the stark perfection of it; every scale, every detail captured and imprinted into living tissue -- into him.

Ezra sighed and let his arm fall to his side. There was no logical explanation for what had happened to him but he recognised good fortune when he saw it; though in truth it was not merely good fortune but salvation. The Ranger bowed his head feeling a sudden flood of not only remorse but contrition. He had contemplated ending his life when he had understood the nature of his injury and he believed that if the healer had not drugged him, in his despair he would have fallen on his own sword, finally consumed by the growing darkness in his soul that he had been fighting for so long. A soft whisper in his mind, yet so real he actually turned to see if Mairè had approached without him knowing, asked sadly if he valued his own life so cheaply.

The Ranger was still standing beside the pool, head bowed, in an attitude of contemplative reverence when the Fen woman finally deemed enough time had passed for him to have attended all his needs and came slowly back through the lush grass towards the spring. His pose, so still and so completely at peace, stole her breath away.

This was Wind Walker; her Sister-Warrior's mate, a friend of her people, a trusted and esteemed companion -- and a man. For a moment her gaze travelled over the strong, compact body, the broad shoulders of the swordsman tapering to the lean waist and hips, down the muscular thighs and strong calves typical of a horseman, and she chided herself for being tempted, even just for one moment, to take advantage of his vulnerability.

"Wind Walker?" Her voice was hushed, recognising that something about the Ranger had changed. "What is it?"

He shook his head, not speaking, and when he did raise his face the emerald eyes were sparkling with moisture, although the sadness that she read there was tempered by a wry smile. Impulsively she stepped forward to take both her hands in his, hesitated as she saw the tattooed serpent coiled around his arm, then completed the move and quickly drew him to her sensing his confusion. The power of his embrace surprised her but she returned it and in full measure, freely allowing him to draw on her strength; feeling his breath warm on her neck as he leaned into her, and as she felt the drum of his heart through the leather of her breastplate she wondered what could have caused this sudden change in him, this breach in the Ranger's ordinarily well-guarded emotional defences. With a long sigh, he sought her hand and she felt him signing what he could not bring himself to say: "Forgive me. I am afraid."

"Tell me, *cariadon*," she whispered, strangely moved by his frank admission, "Tell me what it is that you fear."

At first the warrior believed she had misread the sign, but she knew there could be no mistake. His fingers had slowly and deliberately signed against her hand just one word. "Myself".

For some reason, that chilled her more than anything else he could possibly have said and as he gently released her and drew back, turning quickly away to stoop and gather up his clothing, she could not rid herself of the premonition that the Wind Walker had a long and lonely journey ahead of him. Reaching out, her fingers closed around his wrist and he froze for the space of several heartbeats, his expression now fixed and unreadable. He had shut her out.

"What happened here, Ezra?" she prompted gently.

He twisted his arm free but without any ill intent and shook his head again, not meeting her eyes. "I don't know." He started to dress. "And I don't think I want to know."

"But, Ezra, your wounds..." she hesitated, "they are healed. How can this be?"

The Ranger dressed quickly, pulling on pants and boots, and finally cinching his sword belt around his hips with such diligent precision that Mairè suspected Ezra of merely trying to delay his reply but after some thought he raked his fingers through his still-wet hair and finally looked straight at her, his gaze steady.

"What is it you want, Mairè? What would you have me say?" He sighed and hooked one thumb into his sword belt. "I'm sorry, Mairè, but I have no answers." The Ranger bent then to retrieve his dagger and, straightening again, shoved it forcefully into its sheath. "How can I explain that which I don't understand myself?" After a moment his expression softened and he clasped his hand around her upper arm. "Come now, let us speak no more of it."

She placed her own hand over his and squeezed gently. "As you wish. It shall be as you say."

Ezra nodded once and started to wheel away, but then hesitated and slowly turned back to the Fen woman. "Mairè, I...I would not have you think any less of me for yielding to a passing moment of weakness. You have my apologies for burdening you with my craven mewlings that were, at best...unworthy."

Mairè's eyes flashed in anger. "By all that is holy, if you had not already suffered so, *cariadon*, I would knock you down where you stand! Not only do you diminish me by any such thought, but you diminish yourself. This time I will let it pass but always remember this; it is not my place to judge you and neither should you judge yourself so harshly." She sighed and shook her head, and her next words were without heat. "I will say only this to you, Wind Walker: sometimes the enemy within yourself is harder to vanquish than the bravest and best warrior on the battlefield."

Accepting the warrior's censure with a subtle inclination of his head and an expression of mild surprise, a faint smile touched the Ranger's lips as his hand closed around the black pearl ring at his throat.

*"N'est-ce pas."*

Josiah slowed as he approached the campsite inviting an impatient sigh from his young companion already laden with a variety of forage and eager to be done with the trappings of domesticity that he so loathed. This was too much like being the priest's apprentice again, and it galled him that Chris, Vin and Buck had not thought him experienced enough to join their party. He would wager that they were having a more exciting time of it than him.

“What now, Josiah? I’m already burdened like a packhorse, and we have enough food here to last for days! What else would you have me carry?”

The druid held up his staff for silence and Jeh-Di watched, his curiosity piqued, as the priest cautiously examined the air, recognising that Josiah’s keenly honed senses had been alerted to some subtle change that Jeh-di himself had missed, and that now he was reading something from the very ether. “Do you not feel it, Jeh-Di? Have I wasted all these years on you for nothing?”

So prompted, the mage’s former apprentice concentrated hard and sure enough, beyond the clean, earthy smell of the tubers and roots he carried, there was a faint suggestion of something less wholesome on the breeze and as he closed his eyes and surrendered to his senses as Josiah had taught him, he could not only smell it, but taste it and feel it as well. He opened his eyes and cast a quick glance at the grizzled priest. “Magic.”

Josiah gave a quick smile. “So not wasted after all. And what did your gleaning tell you?”

“There has been a disruption in the forces of nature. A casting made not long ago.”

“Aye lad.” He sighed. “You have the right of it. A disruption that perhaps does not bode well.”

There was something in the druid’s tightly drawn features that sent a ripple of unease through Jeh-Di’s vitals. “Might it not be Nathan’s work?” he ventured.

In reply, Josiah shot a baleful glare in his direction and he shuffled uncomfortably. Of course not. Nathan was a healer; healers drew on the power of nature, much as the druids did but theirs was sorcery of the subtlest kind and did not in any way manipulate the elements. Such a taint as he had recognised came from the bending of natural forces to the will. He mumbled a hasty apology, for while he was no longer apprenticed to the priest, he felt a profound loyalty to his old mentor.

“Every casting leaves a mark, Jeh-Di. A mark as distinct as a footprint, with no two alike, and whoever made this particular magic drew on the very source of life itself. I have heard tell of this but have not seen the like of it before in all my days. Yet I cannot tell if this was done for good or ill, but my instinct tells me that all is not as it seems in this fair place.”

“So this is not the safe haven we first thought?”

“That I cannot say, lad. Things are rarely ever as they first appear. Now come. Let us waste no more time. We have already been away far longer than is prudent. I would know what has transpired in our absence, sooner rather than later.”

Jeh-Di found himself approaching the familiar sunlit grove with something close to apprehension. It all looked the same, although the hair on the nape of his neck and scalp prickled as he felt the residue of a casting all about him. He was not sure what to expect but the sound of laughter was not it and he was pleased to see that Josiah’s own expression was equally baffled. With a brief exchange of glances, the two of them wordlessly pushed through dense willow fronds that bordered the natural arbor where they had made camp.

The Ranger and the Fen warrior appeared to be engaged in some form of martial game involving a knife, a length of leather thong and a great deal of boisterous merriment, which came as something of a surprise to Jeh-Di considering they had left Mairè keeping watch over a gravely ill Ezra not too long before. The would-be warrior looked quickly at the druid beside him, his confusion written plainly on his face. “Josiah...?”

“Ask not the how or the why, my boy,” interrupted the priest hurriedly, “just be thankful that it is so.”

Jeh-Di looked back to the scene in the clearing. Ezra, stripped to the waist and moving with the grace and speed of a cat, repeatedly avoided being touched by the blade that Mairè wielded with such skill, while the Fen warrior laughingly taunted the Ranger as she darted first one way and the next trying to catch him off guard. Then, like two wild creatures sensing danger, the two turned almost as one, their sport forgotten in an instant as they marked the intruders. The transformation was so dramatic that Jeh-Di flinched and took a step back, expecting at any minute to feel the bite of the blade as, in the blink of an eye, Mairè reversed the knife in her hand and drew back her arm to send the weapon on its way. Her speed was matched only by Ezra’s move to block the throw, his face giving nothing away as he calmly restrained the woman’s arm. Then, with the familiar wry smile that Jeh-Di found strangely reassuring, Ezra just as suddenly relaxed and slowly began to unwind the leather thong that bound him to the Fen warrior from around his wrist.

“So the wanderers are returned.”

“That we are,” answered Josiah, taking a single step forward, “as it seems you are also returned to us.”

Ezra inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Returned and...restored," he agreed with a sigh, letting the leather strip fall to the ground and absently massaging his left wrist, "albeit somewhat...changed."

Changed indeed. Jeh-Di shivered, the hair on his forearms standing erect, as he stared in rapt fascination at the blood-red serpent etched into the living flesh of the Ranger's arm, its scales rippling sinuously, given life by the very movement of Ezra's muscles beneath the skin. Torn between a dizzying sense of wonder and stomach-churning awe he found he had neither power to speak nor move. Ezra's lips curved into an almost mocking smile but it didn't quite reach his eyes and Jeh-Di suddenly felt as if he had been impaled on a skewer of ice. Feeling the heat of embarrassment rise to his face, he guiltily tore his eyes from the Ranger unable to meet the challenge in the steely gaze. He cursed himself for his crassness, wondering if he would ever stop showing himself up for the rustic yokel he had been born rather than the warrior he aspired to be.

A strong and powerful arm unexpectedly curved around his shoulders and he felt the solidly comforting nearness of the druid, for once not taking exception to the older man's intervention. He straightened and took a deep breath, readily yielding to the welcome sensation of well-being that quickly stole over him, strengthening his resolve and dispelling the growing feeling of self-doubt before it had time to grow. Josiah's doing. Jeh-Di let his eyes venture back to Ezra, allowing his gaze to sweep again over the cunningly worked serpent coiled about the Ranger's arm before he met the cool green eyes that no longer seemed ready to pierce his soul with their icy barbs.

"You are healed then?" Ezra gave Josiah a curious look and for a brief instant Jeh-Di saw a glimpse of some of the Ranger's disquiet behind his coldly indifferent façade. The man was hiding it well but he was afraid, and Jeh-Di could sense it strongly now. "At least in body?"

Ezra laughed, a quick, mirthless sound, as he broke eye contact and looked away. "As you can see with your own eyes."

Josiah released his grip and walked to within an arm's length of the Ranger, leaning easily on his staff. "Yes, my eyes tell me much, my son, but I feel that there is more to this remarkable transformation than meets the eye." His hand lifted to rest lightly on Ezra's bared shoulder, his fingers touching the finely wrought lines of the snake's whip-like tail. "We must talk."

Jeh-Di recognised more than suggestion in the mage's words; a subtle coercive casting and Ezra would freely unburden himself whether he wanted to or not. He

watched the momentary struggle as the Ranger fought the impulse then, after a moment, his eyes softened, glazing a little as he was compelled to surrender his will. He nodded once. "Yes. We must talk."

If there was one thing Vin hated more than riding a horse, it was riding a horse without a saddle. He now rode double behind Buck, in some ways grateful that there had been only time to ready two mares. Had he been expected to ride alone, and bareback, he suspected he would have spent more time picking himself up out of the dirt than astride the beast and, in truth, given the option he preferred the indignity of being a passenger to the certainty of making a fool of himself. The two men had an amazing affinity with the beasts and in less than three candlemarks two of the animals had been ready to tolerate a rider. The bridles that Buck had fashioned from rope were bitless but no less effective for that, although the mercenary was relieved that it was someone more skilled than he who was obliged to try and control a newly gentled horse with little more than a halter. Chris, following a little way behind, led the spirited stallion on a long lead rope.

Vin glanced back, sensing that Chris was uneasy and that his disquiet mirrored in part his own uncertainty. The other man briefly raised the hand that controlled the reins of his mount in a casual signal that all was well with him but he looked weary and the mercenary knew that the weariness was as much of the spirit as of the body. Ezra's misfortune had affected the knight deeply and he could feel the turmoil that L'Arabee suffered. Although no one had spoken of it openly, they all feared for the Ranger; if not for his health then for his sanity.

For his own part, the Galalan trusted nothing in this idyllic place. It was as if the everyday rules that held the fabric of the universe together and by which all men lived, made no sense at all since they had passed beyond the gate. There was something here that made the hair on his scalp prickle and it stirred his soldier's instinct for hidden danger. Whichever way he looked at it, he could not help but think that they had somehow been lured into a trap.

He had shunned the unwanted gift of ancient memory, afraid of what it would mean to surrender to a power he did not understand. But here he found he could not shut out the voices so easily and one, above all others, had finally come forward to seduce him with the promise of enlightenment and, this time, he had not been so quick to turn away. Perhaps this one voice was the guide of which Josiah had spoken; or perhaps he had

just lost his mind, but the often cryptic and always confusing messages now gnawed at the edges of his conscience, and he was becoming more afraid for the safety of them all.

“Vin?”

The mercenary, startled by Buck’s sudden intrusion into his thoughts, lost his balance and slipped dangerously sideways. Saved from an embarrassing tumble to the ground by the man-at-arms’ quick reflexes, he cursed his momentary lapse and waited for the inevitable jibe at his horsemanship, but instead Buck had reined in the mare and was frowning at him.

“What in all the hells is wrong with you?”

Vin shook his head, not understanding Buck’s uncharacteristic flare of irritation. “Nothing’s wrong with me. Why did you stop?”

Buck snorted and let go of Vin’s arm. “If you’re going to fall asleep, maybe you should ride in front.” He grinned broadly. “Like a maid. Where you’ll be safe.”

“Demons take you, Buck! I’d rather walk.” He started to dismount, confused but nonetheless stung by the man-at-arms’ words, which had angered him although he could not say why. So, he was a bad horseman, but that didn’t mean he had to listen to Buck’s constant harping.

“Your choice,” shrugged the other man, “You’ve been trying to throw yourself off for the last half league anyway. Probably safer if you leg it.”

Vin stopped abruptly, his skin prickling portentously. “I’ve been what?”

Buck turned slightly in the saddle. “You’ve been muttering and fidgeting back there like a man with the ague for nigh on half a candlemark, and three times or more you’ve almost hit the dirt.”

Something in his eyes told Vin that he spoke the truth and a hollow pit opened up in his gut. Half a candlemark?

“The sooner we get out of this accursed land the better I’ll like it,” he grumbled, “Nothing here is as it should be.”

Buck smiled. “In my humble experience, mercenary, things rarely are. Now, can we ride on or do you still wish to try shanks’ mare instead?”

Vin’s answer was to finish his dismount and crouch to adjust his boot lacings and leather greaves. “I fancy I’ll walk. I need to feel the solid earth beneath my feet and take the measure of this land, before I lose my wits altogether.” He straightened and took a deep breath, then looked up at the man at arms, his eyes as cold and hard as chips of

sapphire. "Believe me when I say we are no more than prisoners here, Buck, and I would know my enemy."

Before Buck was able to respond the mercenary turned and broke into a jog, quickly distancing himself from the two mounted men.

With a weary sigh, the man-at-arms slowly shook his head and waited for Chris to close the gap between them. The knight was staring after the departing soldier with a bemused expression on his face. "What's troubling him?"

Buck urged his mount forward as Chris drew level. "Any guess you make would be as good as mine," he shrugged, "but one thing I do know: something is amiss with our mercenary friend and far more than an aversion to horses would account for."

Chris sighed deeply, his eye still on Vin. "I think we need to quit this place, Buck, and soon. The longer we're here, the less I like it." He dug his heels into his horse, sending it forward with a startled leap. "Perhaps Vin is right to start running."

The man-at-arms shook his head as Chris cantered ahead of him and leaning forward, he patted his mount's neck.

"You know something, Horse? I think maybe you and I are the only sane ones in this godforsaken wilderness." Buck straightened and urged the animal forward. "But that's just between you and me; agreed?"

Josiah walked slowly without speaking for some distance before finally halting and sitting down on a fallen log before gesturing for Ezra to take up a place beside him on his right. The moment of hesitation before the Ranger did as he was bidden was just enough to show the druid that Ezra had the capacity to resist the compulsion that had been cast upon him but that he had chosen to submit. A gentle smile flickered across his lips, acknowledging that the more time he spent with Ezra the less he understood him.

"It would seem that you have been blessed, my son." He waved casually to indicate the dramatic change in the younger man's physical appearance.

Ezra did not look up, instead he picked absently at the rough bark of the tree and snorted at the priest's words. "Or cursed!" he countered, bitterly.

"A curse, Ezra? I think not. You almost forfeited your life, yet now you sit here, whole and healed. How can that be a curse?"

The Ranger did not answer but slowly shook his head, his drawn and pale features revealing none of his usual easygoing confidence but only doubt and uncertainty.

“Ezra, tell me what happened here,” Josiah prompted quietly, not making any demand but rather inviting the troubled Ranger to unburden himself, although he cautiously strengthened the compulsion already at work on the younger man's mind.

“The pool,” Ezra replied simply, “I bathed in the pool.”

“You were alone?”

Ezra raised his head at last and green eyes, as frigid as the northern seas, met the druid's keen gaze and Josiah felt the backlash of his resentment at the question. Recognising his mistake, he held up his hand in a gesture of conciliation, at the same time warding himself to buffer the anger already flowing from the labile Ranger. While Ezra had no magic of his own with which to harm anyone, his skill in the deflection of even a benign casting was considerable and Josiah had no wish to feel the sting of his disfavour. “Do not be so hasty to take meaning from my words that is not there, Ezra, but answer me this instead: you saw no one else while you were bathing?”

“No one.” Ezra looked away, his shoulders suddenly sagging as he closed his eyes, his voice dropping to barely more than a whisper, “Yet I felt...” He stopped abruptly and shook his head again.

Josiah could sense the inner struggle that seemed to be consuming the Ranger and allowed a moment for the resistance to fade. Soon enough he would yield and Josiah had time - and patience - enough to wait.